

INFERNO!

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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

Chris D'Onofrio
Illustration

GREETINGS! We're back to 'normal' for the Inferno! team after last issue's special all-Gaunt's Ghosts issue. Well, you know how it is. When you stick out five years of short stories, comics and special features every two months, come anniversary time you want to try something just a little different. And judging by reader reaction both in your letters and emails (address below) and on the special Black Library message board (www.blacklibrary.co.uk/forum), it was a roaring success. There were a few fantasy fans who were a tad disgruntled that their preferred genre wasn't represented last issue, but hang on chaps – next time we do the 'special issue' thing, it'll definitely be all fantasy, promise.

As for Gaunt creator Dan Abnett, well, we really thought we'd sucked his talents dry, if only for a while, with all the splendid material we managed to extract from him for last issue, but nope. Here he is again with a new and exclusive Eisenhorn story for you, featuring an incident that is not covered in the epic conclusion to his trilogy of novels about the cunning inquisitor, *Hereticus*. Talking of returning talents, well, how could we go wrong with the latest adventure of Deff Skwadron. The Inferno! team tries not

to show favouritism when commissioning stories, but darn it all, we love these guys. In this case just the title alone – Katch Da Squigeon – has us scrabbling to rush it into the schedule. And as always happens, by the time the script arrived we'd already announced that it was running in the next issue of Inferno! We promise it won't take a year for the next one to see the light of day though.

We're also seeing a fair amount of new blood arriving, bringing fabulous new stories for you all. This issue sees what we're fairly certain is our first 'collaborative' story. Matthew Farrer is a familiar name here in the Inferno! dungeons, but his writing mate Ed Rusk makes his debut with his co-credit on the splendid 'Liberation Day'. Must get around to asking them how they produced their story. I mean, did one think up the idea and the other write it all up? Did one hammer away at the keyboard while the other paced up and down, spitting out cool lines fast as his friend could type? Or perhaps one did the first line, emailed it to his mate to have the second added, got it back to add the third, and so on. Hmm. Probably nothing as drastic. However they did it, it goes to show that collaborations produce as

good a story as any solitary creator.

AS YOU'LL have noticed, this is something of a meandering and rambling intro this issue. What I'm really doing is making the most of my time here, as – notwithstanding the odd guest spot – I'm handing over this slot, and the day-to-day running of the magazine over to newly promoted editor Christian Dunn. It's not that I'm going away; it's just that the success of the Black Library novels is taking all my time, so I think it's only fair to hand over to an editor who can devote all of his energies to making the BL magazines the best around. And while it's all-change hereabouts, we're also bidding a sad farewell to assistant editor Richard Williams, who is leaving us for pastures new. Now he's no longer spending his every waking moment slaving over some hot proof-reading, perhaps he'll even honour us with some more stories of the calibre of the one that got him hired in the first place. Best of luck to the both of them!

Marc

Marc Gascoigne
Publisher

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AN EISENHORN STORY

BY DAN ABNETT

LORD FROIGRE, much to everyone's dismay including, I'm sure, his own, was dead.

It was a dry, summer morning in 355.M41 and I was taking breakfast with Alizebeth Bequin on the terrace of Spaeton House when I received the news. The sky was a blurry blue, the colour of Sameterware porcelain, and down in the bay the water was a pale lilac, shot through with glittering frills of silver. Sand doves warbled from the drowsy shade of the estate orchards.

Jubal Kircher, my craggy, dependable chief of household security, came out into the day's heat from the garden room, apologised courteously for interrupting our private meal, and handed me a folded square of thin transmission paper.

'Trouble?' asked Bequin, pushing aside her dish of ploin crepes.

'Froigre's dead,' I replied, studying the missive.

'Froigre who?'

'Lord Froigre of House Froigre.'

'You knew him?'

'Very well. I would count him as a friend. Well, how very miserable. Dead at eighty-two. That's no age.'

'Was he ill?' Bequin asked.

'No. Aen Froigre was, if anything, maddeningly robust and healthy. Not a scrap of augmetics about him. You know the sort.' I made this remark pointedly. My career had not been kind to my body. I had been repaired,

rebuilt, augmented and generally sewn back together more times than I cared to remember. I was a walking testimonial to Imperial Medicae reconstruction surgery. Alizebeth, on the other hand, still looked like a woman in her prime, a beautiful woman at that, and only the barest minimum of juvenat work had preserved her so.

'According to this, he died following a seizure at his home last night. His family are conducting thorough investigations, of course, but...' I drummed my fingers on the table-top.

'Foul play?'

'He was an influential man.'

'Such men have enemies.'

'And friends,' I said. I handed her the communiqué. 'That's why his widow has requested my assistance.'

But for my friendship with Aen, I'd have turned the matter down. Alizebeth had only just arrived on Gudrun after an absence of almost eighteen months, and would be gone again in a week, so I had resolved to spend as much time with her as possible. The operational demands of the Distaff, based on Messina, kept her away from my side far more than I would have liked.

But this was important, and Lady Froigre's plea too distraught to ignore.

'I'll come with you,' Alizebeth suggested. 'I feel like a jaunt in the country.' She called for a staff car to be brought round from the stable

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block and we were on our way in under an hour.



FELIPPE GABON, one of Kircher's security detail, acted as our driver. He guided the car up from Spaeton on a whisper of thrust and laid in a course for Menizerre. Soon we were cruising south-west over the forest tracts and the verdant cultivated belt outside Dorsay and leaving the Insume headland behind.

In the comfortable, climate-controlled rear cabin of the staff car, I told Alizebeth about Froigre.

'There have been Froigres on Gudrun since the days of the first colonies. Their house is one of the Twenty-Six Venerables, that is to say one of the twenty-six original noble fiefs, and as such has an hereditary seat in the Upper Legislature of the planetary government. Other, newer houses have considerably more power and land these days, but nothing can quite eclipse the prestige of the Venerables. Houses like Froigre, Sangral, Meissian. And Glaw.'

She smiled impishly at my inclusion of that last name.

'So... power, land, prestige... a honeytrap for rivals and enemies. Did your friend have any?'

I shrugged. I'd brought with me several data-slates Psullus had looked out for me from the library. They contained heraldic ledgers, family histories, biographies and memoirs. And very little that seemed pertinent.

'House Froigre vied with House Athensae and House Brudish in the early years of Gudrun, but that's literally ancient history. Besides, House Brudish became extinct after another feud with House Pariti eight hundred years ago. Aen's grandfather famously clashed with Lord Sangral and the then Governor Lord Dougray over the introduction of Founding Levy in the one-nineties, but that was just political, though Dougray

never forgave him and later snubbed him by making Richtien chancellor. In recent times, House Froigre has been very much a quiet, solid, traditional seat in the Legislature. No feuds, that I know of. In fact, there hasn't been an inter-house war on Gudrun for seven generations.

'They all play nicely together, these days, do they?' she asked.

'Pretty much. One of the things I like about Gudrun is that it is so damned civilised.'

'Too damned civilised,' she admonished. 'One day, Gregor, one day this place will lull you into such a deep sense of tranquil seclusion that you'll be caught with your pants down.'

'I hardly think so. It's not complacency, before you jump down my throat. Gudrun – Spaeton House itself – is just a safe place. A sanctuary, given my line of work.'

'Your friend's still dead,' she reminded me.

I sat back. 'He liked to live well. Good food, fine wines. He could drink Nayl under the table.'

'No!'

'I'm not joking. Five years ago, at the wedding of Aen's daughter. I was invited and I took Harlon along as... as I don't know what, actually. You weren't around and I didn't want to go alone. Harlon started bending his lordship's ear with tales of bounty hunting and the last I saw of them they were sprinting their way down their fourth bottle of anise at five in the morning. Aen was up at nine the next day to see his daughter off. Nayl was still asleep at nine the following day.'

She grinned. 'So a life of great appetites may have just caught up with him?'

'Perhaps. Though you'd think that would have shown up on the medicae mortus's report.'

'So you do suspect foul play?'

'I can't shake that idea.'

I was silent for a few minutes, and Alizebeth scrolled her way through several of the slates.

'House Froigre's main income was from mercantile dealings. They hold a twelve point stock in Brade ent Cie and a fifteen per cent share in Helican SubSid Shipping. What about trade rivals?'

'We'd have to expand our scope off-planet. I suppose assassination is possible, but that's a strange way to hit back at a trade rival. I'll have to examine their records. If we can turn up signs of a clandestine trade fight, then maybe assassination is the answer.'

'Your friend spoke out against the Ophidian Campaign.'

'So did his father. Neither believed it was appropriate to divert funds and manpower into a war of reconquest in the sub-sector next door when there was so much to put in order on the home front.'

'I was just wondering...' she said.

'Wonder away, but I think that's a dead end. The Ophidian War's long since over and done with and I don't think anyone cares what Aen thought about it.'

'So have you got a theory?'

'Only the obvious ones. None of them with any substantiating data. An internecine feud, targeting Aen from inside the family. A murder driven by some secret affair of the heart. A darker conspiracy that remains quite invisible for now. Or...'

'Or?'

'Too much good living, in which case we'll be home before nightfall.'



FROIGRE HALL, the ancestral pile of the noble House Froigre, was a splendid stack of ivy-swathed oulsite and copper tiles overlooking the Vale of Fiegg, ten kilometres south of Menizerre. Water meadows sloped back from the river, becoming wildflower pastures that climbed through spinneys of larch and fintel to hem the magnificent planned gardens of the house; geometric designs of box-hedge, trim lawn, flowering beds and symmetrical ponds. Beyond the

sandy drive, darkened woods came right down to skirt the back of the great hall, except for where a near-perfect sulleq lawn had been laid. Aen and I had spent several diverting afternoons there, playing against each other. A kilometre north of the house, the gnarled stone finger of the Folly rose from the ascending woods.

'Where to put down, sir?' Gabon asked over the intercom.

'On the drive in front of the portico, if you'd be so kind.'

'What's been going on here?' Alizebeth asked as we came in lower. She pointed. The lawn areas nearest to the hall were littered with scraps of rubbish – paper waste and glittery bits of foil. Some sections of grass were flat and yellow as if compressed and starved of light.

Tiny stones, whipped up by our downwash, ticked off the car's bodywork as we settled in to land.



'**H**Y, MY DEAR Gregor!' Lady Freyl Froigre almost fell into my arms. I held her in a comforting embrace for a few patient moments as she sobbed against my chest.

'Forgive me!' she said suddenly, pulling away and dabbing her eyes with a black lace handkerchief. 'This is all so very terrible. So very, very terrible.'

'My deepest sympathies for your loss, lady,' I said, feeling awkward.

A houseman, his arm banded in black, had led us into a stateroom off the main hall where Lady Froigre was waiting. The blinds were drawn, and mourning tapers had been lit, filling the air with a feeble light and a sickly perfume. Freyl Froigre was a stunning woman in her late sixties, her lush red hair almost flame-pink it was so bright, pulled back and pinned down under a veil coiff of jet scamiscoire. Her grief-gown was slate epinchire, the sleeves ending in delicate interwoven gloves so that not one speck of her flesh was uncovered.

I introduced Alizebeth, who murmured her condolences, and Lady Froigre nodded. Then she suddenly looked flustered.

'Oh, my. Where are my manners? I should have the staff bring refreshments for you and—'

'Hush, lady,' I said, taking her arm and walking her down the long room into the soft shade of the shutters. 'You have enough on your mind. Grief is enough. Tell me what you know and I will do the rest.'

'You're a good man, sir. I knew I could trust you.' She paused and waited while her current wracks subsided.

'Aen died just before midnight last night. A seizure. It was quick,' the physician said.

'What else did he say, lady?'

She drew a data-wand from her sleeve and handed it to me. 'It's all here.' I plucked out my slate and plugged it in. The display lit up with the stored files.

Death by tremorous palpitations of the heart and mind. A dysfunction of the spirit. According to the medicae's report, Aen Froigre had died because of a spasm in his anima.

'This means...' I paused, '...nothing. Who is your physician?'

'Genorus Notil of Menizerre. He has been the family medicae since the time of Aen's grandfather.'

'His report is rather... non-specific, lady. Could I present the body for a further examination?'

'I've already done that,' she said softly. 'The surgeon at Menizerre General who attended said the same. My husband died of terror.'

'Terror?'

'Yes, inquisitor. Now tell me that isn't the work of the infernal powers?'

There had, she told me, been a celebration. A Grand Fete. Aen's eldest son, Rinton, had returned home two weeks before, having mustered out of his service in the Imperial Guard. Rinton Froigre had been a captain in the Fiftieth Gudrunite and seen six years' service in the Ophidean sub-sector. Such was his

father's delight on his return, a fete was called. A carnival feast. Travelling players from all around the canton had attended, along with troupes of musicians, acrobats, armies of stall holders, entertainers, and hundreds of folk from the town. That explained the litter and faded patches on the lawn. Tent pitches. The scars of marques.

'Had he any enemies?' I asked, pacing the shuttered room.

'None that I know of.'

'I would like to review his correspondence. Diaries too, if he kept them.'

'I'll see. I don't believe he kept a diary, but our rubricator will have a list of correspondence.'

On the top of the harpsichord was a framed portrait, a hololith of Aen Froigre, smiling.

I picked it up and studied it.

'The last portrait of him,' she said. 'Taken at the fete. My last connection with him.'

'Where did he die?'

'The Folly,' said Lady Froigre. 'He died in the Folly.'



THE WOODS were damp and dark. Boughs creaked in the late afternoon wind and odd birdsong thrilled from the shadows.

The Folly was a stone drum capped by a slate needle. Inside, it was bare and terribly musty. Sand doves fluttered up in the roof spaces. Cobwebs glazed the bare windows.

'This is where I found him,' said a voice from behind me.

I turned. Rinton Froigre stooped in under the doorframe. He was a well-made boy of twenty-five, with his mother's lush red hair. His eyes had a curious, hooded aspect.

'Rinton.'

'Sir,' he bowed slightly.

'Was he dead when you found him?'

'No, inquisitor. He was laughing and talking. He liked to come up here. He loved the Folly. I came up to thank him for the fete that he had thrown in my honour. We were talking together when suddenly he went into convulsions. Just minutes later, before I could summon help, he was dead.'

I didn't know Rinton Froigre well, though his service record was very respectable, and I knew his father had been proud of him. Aen had never mentioned any animosity from his son, but in any noble house there is always the spectre of succession to consider. Rinton had been alone with his father at the time of death. He was a seasoned soldier, undoubtedly no stranger to the act of killing.

I kept an open mind – literally. Even without any invasive mental probing, it is possible for a psionic of my ability to sense surface thoughts. There was no flavour of deceit about Rinton's person, though I could feel carefully contained loss, and the tingle of trepidation. Small wonder, I considered. Uncommon are the citizens of the Imperium who do not register anxiety at being quizzed by an inquisitor of the Holy Ordos.

There was no point pressing him now. Rinton's story might easily be put to the test with an auto-seance, during which psychometric techniques would simply reveal the truth of his father's last moments to me.

Rinton walked me back to the Hall, and left me to my ponderings in Aen's study. It was as he had left it, I was told.

The room was half-panelled and lined for the most part with glazed shelves of neatly bound books and data-slates. Discreet glow-globes hovered around the edges of the room at head-height, set to a low luminosity, and a selection of scroll-backed couches and over-stuffed chairs were arranged in front of the high-throated ceramic fireplace with its wood-burning fusion stove.

The desk, under the diamond-paned west windows, was a wide crescent of polished duralloy floated a metre off the carpet by passive suspensor pods. The desk was clean and bare.

I sat at it, depressing slightly the hydraulics of the writing chair – I was half a head taller than Aen Froigre. I studied the mirror-smooth, slightly raked surface of the desk. There was no sign of any control panel, but a gentle wave of my hand across it woke up heat-sensitive touch-plates engraved into the duralloy's finish. I touched a few, but they needed Aen's touch – probably a combination of palmprint and genekey – to unlock them.

That, or inquisition-grade software. I unpinned my Inquisitorial rosette, which I had been wearing on the sternum of a my black leather coat, and slid open the signal port. Holding it low over the desk, I force fed the touch-plates with several magenta-level security override programs. It gave up the fight almost at once, opening systems without even the need for passwords.

Built into the stylish desk – an item of furniture that had clearly cost Aen a lot of money – was a fairly powerful cogitator, a vox-pict uplink, a message archive, two filing archives, and a master control for the simple, limited electronic systems built into the Hall. Separate pages of each file and message could be displayed as a facsimile on the blotter plate and a touch of a finger turned them or put them away. Aen had destroyed all paper records.

I played with it for some time, but the most interesting thing I found was a log of invoices for services provided at the fete, and a list of the invitations. I copied both into my own data-slate.

Alizebeth and Gabon arrived while I was busy with that. Alizebeth had been interviewing the household staff, and Gabon had been out, walking the grounds.

'There were over nine hundred guests here, sir,' he said, 'and maybe another five hundred players, musicians, entertainers and carnival folk.'

'Where from?'

'Menizerre, mostly,' he replied. 'Local entertainers, a few troubadours and some street tumblers from the biweekly textile market. The biggest individual groups were Kalikin's Company, an acclaimed troupe of travelling actors, and Sunsable's

Touring Fair, who provided the games and rides and diversions.'

I nodded. Gabon was as thorough as usual. A short, spare man in his one fifties with cropped black hair and a bushy moustache, he had been with the Dorsay Arbites for about seventy years before retiring into private service. He wore a simple, refined dark blue suit that had been ingeniously tailored to hide the fact that he was wearing a handgun in a shoulder rig.

'What about you?' I asked Alizebeth. She sat down on one of the couches.

'Nothing scintillating. The staff seem genuinely shocked and upset at the death. They all react with outrage at the idea your friend might have had any enemies.'

'It seems quite clear to me that he did have some,' I said.

Alizebeth reached into the folds of her gown and fished out a small, hard object. She tossed it across onto the desk top and it landed with a tap. There it extended four, multi-jointed limbs and scurried across onto my palm.

I turned the wriggling poison-snooper over and pressed the recessed stud on its belly. A little ball of hololithic energy coalesced above its head-mounted projector and I read it as slowly scrolled around on its own axis.

'Traces of lho, obscura and several other class II and III narcotics in the garden area and the staff quarters. Penshel seed traces found in the stable block. More lho, as well as listeria and e. coli in small amounts in the kitchen section... hmmm...'

Alizebeth shrugged. 'The usual mix of recreational drugs one might expect, none in large quantities, and the kitchens's as hygienic as anywhere. You'd probably get the same sort of readings from Spaeton House.'

'Probably. Penshel seeds, they're quite unusual.'

'A very mild stimulant,' said Gabon. 'I didn't know anyone still used that stuff. Time was, it was the drug of choice in the artists' quarter of Dorsay, back when I was on the force. The seeds are dried, rolled and smoked in pipes. A little bohemian, an old man's smoke.'

'Most of the outdoor traces can be put down to the visiting entertainers,' I mused, 'plus a little off-duty pleasure from the staff or loose-living guests. What about the stable block? Are any of Froigre's ostlers penshel smokers?'

Alizebeth shook her head. 'They'd cleared large parts of the stable area to provide spaces for the fair stall-holders.'

I put the snooper down on the desk and it wriggled back and forth for a few moments until it got enough purchase to right itself. 'So nothing untoward, in fact. And certainly no significant toxins.'

'None at all,' said Alizebeth.

Damn. Given the description of Aen's death, I had been quite sure poison was the key, perhaps some assassin's sophisticated toxin that had not shown up on the initial medicae report. But Alizebeth's snooper was high-grade and thorough.

'What do we do now?' she asked.

I passed her my data-slate. 'Send the contents of this to Aemos by direct vox-link. See what he can come up with.'

Uber Aemos was my ancient and trusted savant. If anyone could see a pattern or make a connection, it was him.



EVENING FELL. I went outside, alone. I felt annoyed and frustrated. In fact, I felt thwarted. I'd come there as a favour to my old friend's widow, offering my services, and in most respects I was overqualified. I was an Imperial inquisitor, and this was most likely just a job for the local arbites. I had expected to have the entire matter sewn up in a few hours, to settle things swiftly in a quick, unofficial investigation, and leave with the thanks of the family for sparing them a long, drawn-out inquest.

But the clues just weren't there. There was no motive, no obvious antagonist, no aggressor, but still it seemed likely that Aen Froigre had been killed. I looked at

the medicae report again, hoping to find something that would establish natural causes.

Nothing. Something, someone, had taken my friend's life, but I couldn't tell what or who or why.

The evening skies were dark, stained a deep violet and smeared with chasing milky clouds. An early moon shone, passing behind the running trails of cloud every minute or so. A wind was gathering, and the stands of trees beside the lawn were beginning to sway and swish. The leaves made a cold sound, like rain.

I walked over to my flyer, popped the cargo trunk and took out Barbarisater. I slowly freed it from its silk bindings and drew the long, gleaming blade from its machined scabbard. Barbarisater had been an heirloom sword, a psychically-attuned weapon from the forges of distant Carthae and slaved to the minds of the generations of warrior women who had wielded it. Enhancing its strength with pentagrammic wards, I had used the long sabre in my battle against the heretic Quixos, during which struggle it had been broken below the tip. Master swordsmiths had remade the blade from the broken main portion, creating a shorter, straighter blade by rounding off and edging the break and reducing the hilt. A good deal smaller than its old self, now more a single-handed rapier than a hand-and-a-half sabre, it was still a potent weapon.

Naked, in my hand, it hummed and whined as my mind ran through it and made it resonate. The incised wards glowed and sobbed out faint wisps of smoke. I walked out over the grass under the seething trees, holding the blade out before me like a dowsing rod, sweeping the scene, letting the blade-tip slide along the invisible angles of space. Twice, on my circuit of the lawns, it twitched as if tugged by sprite hands, but I could discern nothing from the locations.

But there was something there. My first hint of a malign focus. My first hint that not only was foul play involved, but that Lady Froigre might be right.

Though they had left only the slightest traces behind them, infernal powers had been at work here.



ALIZEBETH came into my room at eight the next morning. She woke me by sitting down on the side of my bed and handed me a cup of hot, black caffeine as I roused.

She was already dressed and ready for work. The day was bright. I could hear the household coming to life: pans clattering the kitchen block and the butler calling to his pages in the nearby gallery.

'Bad storm in the night,' she said. 'Brought trees down.'

'Really?' I grumbled, sitting up and sipping the sweet, dark caffeine.

I looked at her. It wasn't like Bequin to be so perky this early.

'Out with it,' I said.

She handed me a data-slate. 'Aemos has been busy. Must've worked all night.'

'Through the storm.'

'There was no storm up his way. It was local.' I didn't really hear that reply. I was caught up in a close reading of the slate.

Failing to cross-match just about every detail I had sent him, Aemos had clearly become bored. The list of guests I had sent him had led to nothing, despite his best efforts to make connections. The caterers and performers had revealed nothing either. No links to the underworld or cult activity, no misdeeds or priors, except for the usual clutch of innocent and minor violations one might expect. One of the travelling actors had been charged with affray twenty years before, and another had done time for grievous wounding, that sort of thing.

The only item that had flagged any sort of connection was the description of Aen Froigre's death. Aemos had only turned to that rather vague clue once he'd exhausted all others.

In the past twenty months, eleven people in the Drunner Region of Gudrun, which is to say the coastal area encompassing Menizerre, Dorsay and Insume all the way to Madua chapeltown, had died of a similar, mystery ailment. Only a tight, deliberate search like the one Aemos had conducted would have shown up such a connection, given the scale of area involved and the size of population. Listed together, the deaths stood out like a sore thumb.

Here, Aemos had come into his own. Another clerk might have sent those findings to me and waited for direction, but Aemos, hungry to answer the questions himself, had pressed on, trying to make a pattern out of them. No simple task. There was nothing to demographically or geographically link the victims. A housewife here, a millkeeper there, a landowner in one small village, a community doctor in another, seventy kilometres away.

The only thing they had in common was the sudden, violent and inexplicable nature of their demises: seizures, abrupt, fatal.

I set down my cup and scrolled on, aware that Alizebeth was grinning at me.

'Get to the last bit,' she advised. 'Aemos strikes again.'

Right at the last, Aemos revealed another connection.

A day or two before each death, the victim's locality had been paid a visit by Sunsable's Touring Fair.



LADY FROIGRE was most perturbed to see us about to leave. 'There are questions here still...' she began.

'And I'm going to seek the answers,' I said. 'Trust me. I believe my savant has hit upon something.'

She nodded, unhappy. Rinton stepped forward and put his arm around his mother's shoulders.

'Trust me,' I repeated and walked out across the drive to my waiting flyer.

I could hear the sound of chain blades, and turned from the car to walk around the side of the hall. One of the trees brought down in the night's freak storm had crushed part of the stable block and the housemen were working to saw up the huge trunk and clear it.

'Is that where you detected Penshel seed?' I asked Alizebeth when she came to find out what was keeping me.

'Yes,' she said.

'Fetch my blade.'

I called the housemen away from their work, and walked into the collapsed ruin of the stable, crunching over heaps of coarse sawdust. The ivy-clad tree still sprawled through the burst roof.

Alizebeth brought me Barbarisater and I drew it quickly. By then Lady Froigre and Rinton Froigre had emerged to see what I was doing.

Barbarisater hummed in my hand, louder and more throatily than it had done the previous night. As soon as I entered that part of the stable block, the particular stall the tree had smashed, it jumped. The taste of Chaos was here.

'What was this used for?' I asked. 'During the fete, what was this area used for?'

'Storage,' said Lady Froigre. 'The people from the fair wanted to keep equipment and belongings out of sight. Food too, I think. One man had trays of fresh figs he wanted to keep out of the light.'

'And the hololithographer,' said Rinton. 'He used one of those stalls as a dark room.'



SO HOW DO you find a travelling fair in an area the size of the Drunner Region? If you have a copy of their most recent invoice, it's easy. The fair-master, eager to be paid for his services at Froigre Hall, had left as a payment address an inn eighty kilometres

away in Seabrud. From the invoice, I saw that Aen had been asked to mail the payment within five days. The fair moved around a great deal, and the travelling folk didn't believe much in the concept of credit accounts.

From Seabrud, we got a fix on the location of Sunsable's Fair.

They had pitched on a meadow outside the village of Brudmarten, a little, rustic community of ket-herds and weavers that was flanked by a lush, deciduous woodland hillside to the east and marshy, cattle-trampled fields below at the river spill to the west.

It was late afternoon on a hot, close day, the air edged with the heavy, fulminous threat of storms. The sky was dark overhead, but the corn was bright and golden down in the meadows, and pollen balls blew in the breeze like thistle-fibres. Grain-crakes whooped in the corn stands, and small warblers of the most intense blue darted across the hedges.

Gabon lowered the limo to rest in a lane behind the village kirk, a pale, Low Gothic temple in need of up-keep. A noble statue of the Emperor Immaculate stood in the overgrown graveyard, a roost for wood doves. I buckled on my sword and covered it with a long leather cloak. Gabon locked the car.

'Stay with me,' I told Alizebeth, and then turned to Gabon. 'Shadow us.'

'Yes, sir.'

We walked down the lane towards the fair.

Even from a distance, we could hear the noise and feel the energy. The arrival of the fair had brought the folk of Brudmarten and the neighbouring hamlets out in force. Pipe organs were trilling and wheezing in the lank air, and there was the pop and whizz of firecrackers. I could hear laughter, the clatter of rides, the ringing of score bells, children screaming, rowdy men carousing, pistons hissing. The smell of warm ale wafted from the tavern tent.

The gate in the meadow's hedge had been turned into an entranceway, arched with a gaudy, handpainted sign that declared Sunsable's Miraculous Fair of

Fairs open. A white-eyed twist at the gateway took our coins for admission.

Inside, on the meadow, all manner of bright, vulgar sights greeted us. The carousel, lit up with gas-lamps. The ring-toss. The neat, pink box-tent of the clairvoyant. The churning hoop of the whirligig, spilling out the squeals of children. The colourful shouts of the freak show barker. The burnt-sugar smell of floss makers. The clang of test-your-strength machines.

For a penny, you could ride the shoulders of a Battle Titan – actually an agricultural servitor armoured with painted sections of rusty silage hopper. For another penny, you could shoot greenskins in the las-gallery, or touch the Real and Completely Genuine shin bone of Macharius, or dunk for ploins. For tuppence, you could gaze into the Eye of Terror and have your heroism judged by a hooded man with a stutter who claimed to be an ex-Space Marine. The Eye of Terror in this case was a pit dug in the ground and filled with chemical lamps and coloured glass filters.

Nearby, a small donation allowed you to watch an oiled man struggle free from chains, or a burning sack, or a tin bathtub full of broken glass, or a set of stocks.

'Just a penny, sir, just a penny!' howled a man on stilts with a harlequined face as he capered past me. 'For the young lady!'

I decided not to ask what my penny might buy.

'I want to go look at the freak show,' Alizebeth told me.

'Save your money... it's all around us,' I growled.

We pushed on. Coloured balloons drifted away over the field into the encroaching darkness of the thunderhead. Corn crickets rasped furiously in the trampled stalks all about us. Drunken, painted faces swam at us, some lacking teeth, some with glittering augmetic eyes.

'Over there,' I whispered to Alizebeth.

Past the brazier stand of a woman selling paper cones of sugared nuts, and a large handcart stacked with wire cages full of songbirds, was a small booth tent of

heavy red material erected at the side of a brightly painted trailer. A wooden panel raised on bunting-wrapped posts announced 'Hololiths! Most Lifelike! Most Agreeable!' below which a smaller notice said 'A most delightful gift, or a souvenir of the day, captured by the magic art of a master hololithographer.' A frail old man with tufted white hair and small spectacles was seated outside the booth on a folding canvas chair, eating a meat pie that was so hot he had to keep blowing on it.

'Why don't you go and engage his interest?' I suggested.

Alizebeth left my side, pushed through the noisy crowd and stopped by his booth. A sheet of flakboard had been erected beside the booth's entrance, and on it were numerous hololithic pictures mounted for display: some miniatures, some landscapes, some family groups. Alizebeth studied them with feigned interest. The old man immediately leapt up off his chair, stowed the half-eaten pie behind the board and brushed the crumbs off his robes. I moved round to the side, staying in the crowd, watching. I paused to examine the caged birds, though in fact I was looking through their cages at the booth tent.

The old man approached Bequin courteously.

'Madam, good afternoon! I see your attention has been arrested by my display of work. Are they not fairly framed and well-composed?'

'Indeed,' she said.

'You have a good eye, madam,' he said, 'for so often in these country fairs the work of the hololithgrapher is substandard. The composition is frequently poor and the plate quality fades with time. Not so with your humble servant. I have plied this trade of portraiture for thirty years and I fancy I have skill for it. You see this print here? The lakeshore at Entreve?'

'It is a pleasing scene.'

'You are very kind, madam. It is handcoloured, like many of my frames. But this very print was made in the summer of... 329, if my memory serves.'

And you'll appreciate, there is no fading, no loss of clarity, no discolouration.'

'It has preserved itself well.'

'It has,' he agreed, merrily. 'I have patented my own techniques, and I prepare the chemical compounds for the plates by hand, in my modest studio adjoining.' He gestured to his trailer. 'That is how I can maintain the quality and the perfect grade of the hololiths, and reproduce and print them to order with no marked loss of standard from original to duplicate. My reputation rests upon it. Up and down the byeways of the land, the name Bakunin is a watchword for quality portraiture.'

Alizebeth smiled. 'It's most impressive, Master Bakunin. And how much...?'

'Aha!' he grinned. 'I thought you might be tempted, madam, and may I say it would be a crime for your beauty to remain unrecorded! My services are most affordable.'

I moved round further, edging my way to the side of his booth until he and Alizebeth were out of sight behind the awning. I could hear him still making his pitch to her.

On the side of the trailer, further bold statements and enticements were painted in a flourishing script. A large sign read 'Portraits two crowns, group scenes three crowns, gilded miniatures a half-crown only, offering many a striking and famous backcloth for a crown additional.'

I wandered behind the trailer. It was parked at the edge of the fairground, near to a copse of firs and yew that screened the meadow from pastures beyond the ditch. It was damp and shaded here, small animals rustling in the thickets. I tried to look in at one small window, but it was shuttered. I touched the side of the trailer and felt Barbarisater twitch against my hip. There was a door near the far end of the trailer. I tried it, but it was locked.

'What's your business?' growled a voice.

Three burly fairground wranglers had approached along the copse-side of the booths. They had been smoking lho-sticks behind their trailer on a break.

'Not yours,' I assured them.

'You had best be leaving Master Bakunin's trailer alone,' one said. All three were built like wrestlers, their bared arms stained with crude tattoos. I had no time for this.

'Go away now,' I said, pitching my will through my voice. They all blinked, not quite sure what had happened to their minds, and then simply walked away as if I wasn't there.

I returned my attention to the door, and quickly forced the lock with my multi-key. To my surprise, the thin wooden door still refused to open. I wondered if it was bolted from inside, but as I put more weight into it, it did shift a little, enough to prove there was nothing physical holding it. Then it banged back shut as if drawn by immense suction.

My pulse began to race. I could feel the sour tang of warpcraft in the air and Barbarisater was now vibrating in its scabbard. It was time to dispense with subtleties.

I paced around to the front of the booth, but there was no longer any sign of Bequin or the old man. Stooping, I went in under the entrance flap. An inner drop curtain of black cloth stopped exterior light from entering the tent.

I pushed that aside.

'I will be with you shortly, sir,' Bakunin called, 'if you would give me a moment.'

'I'm not a customer,' I said. I looked around. The tent was quite small, and lit by the greenish glow of gas mantles that ran, I supposed, off the trailer supply. Alizebeth was sat at the far side on a ladderback chair, with a dropcloth of cream felt behind her. Bakunin was facing her, carefully adjusting his hololithic camera, a brass and teak machine mounted on a wooden tripod. He looked round at me curiously, his hands still polishing a brass-rimmed lens. Alizebeth rose out of her seat.

'Gregor?' she asked.

'The good lady is just sitting for a portrait, sir. It's all very civilised.' Bakunin peered at me, unsure what to make of me. He smiled and offered his hand. 'I am Bakunin, artist and hololithographer.'

'I am Eisenhorn, Imperial inquisitor.'

'Oh,' he said and took a step backwards. 'I... I...'

'You're wondering why a servant of the Ordos has just walked into your booth,' I finished for him. Bakunin's mind was like an open book. There was, I saw at once, no guile there, except for the natural money-making trickery of a fairground rogue. Whatever else he was, Bakunin was no heretic.

'You took a portrait of Lord Froigre at the fete held on his lands just the other day?' I said, thinking of the picture on the harpsichord back at the hall.

'I did,' he said. 'His lordship was pleased. I made no charge for the work, sir. It was a gift to thank his lordship for his hospitality. I thought perhaps some of his worthy friends might see the work and want the like for themselves, I...'

He doesn't know, I thought. He has no clue what this is about. He's trying to work out how he might have drawn this investigation to himself.

'Lord Froigre is dead,' I told him.

He went pale. 'No, that's... that's...'

'Master Bakunin... do you know if any other of your previous subjects have died? Died soon after your work was complete?'

'I don't, I'm sure. Sir, what are you implying?'

'I have a list of names,' I said, unclipping my data-slate. 'Do you keep records of your work?'

'I keep them all, all the exposed plates, in case that copies or replacements are needed. I have full catalogues of all pictures.'

I showed him the slate. 'Do you recognise any of these names?'

His hands were shaking. He said, 'I'll have to check them against my catalogue,' but I knew for a fact he'd recognised some of them at once.

'Let's do that together,' I said. Alizebeth followed us as we went through the back of the tent into the trailer. It was a dark, confined space, and Bakunin kept apologising. Every scrap of surface, even the untidy flat of his little cot bed, was piled with spares and partly disassembled cameras. There was a musty, chemical

stink, mixed with the scent of Penshel seeds. Bakunin's pipe lay in a small bowl. He reached into a crate under the cot and pulled out several dog-eared record books.

'Let me see now,' he began.

There was a door at the end of the little room. 'What's through there?'

'My dark room, along with the file racks for the exposed plates.'

'It has a door to the outside?'

'Yes,' he said.

'Locked?'

'No...'

'You have an assistant then, someone you ordered to hold the door shut?'

'I have no assistant...' he said, puzzled.

'Open this door,' I told him. He put down the books and went to the communicating door. Just from his body language, I could tell he had been expecting it to open easily.

'I don't understand,' he said. 'It's never jammed before.'

'Stand back,' I said, and drew Barbarisater. The exposed blade filled the little trailer with ozone and Bakunin yelped.

I put the blade through the door with one good swing and ripped it open. There was a loud bang of atmospheric decompression, and fetid air swept over us. A dark, smoky haze drifted out.

'Emperor of Mankind, what is that?'

'Warpcraft,' I said. 'You say you mix your own oxides and solutions?'

'Yes.'

'Where do you get your supplies from?'

'Everywhere, here and there, sometimes from apothecaries, or market traders or...'

Anywhere. Bakunin had experimented with all manner of compounds over the years to create the best, most effective plates for his camera. He'd never been fussy about where the active ingredients came from. Something in his workshop, something in his rack of flasks and bottles, was tainted.

I took a step towards the dark room. In the half-light, things were flickering, half-formed and pale. The baleful energies

lurking in Bakunin's workshop could sense I was a threat, and were trying to protect themselves by sealing the doors tight to keep me out.

I crossed the threshold into the dark room. Alizebeth's cry of warning was lost in the shrieking of tormented air that suddenly swirled around me. Glass bottles and flasks of mineral tincture vibrated wildly in metal racks above Bakunin's work bench. Jars of liquid chemicals and unguent oils shattered and sprayed their contents into the air. The little gas-jet burner flared and ignited, its rubber tube thrashing like a snake. Glass plates, each a square the size of a data-slate, and each sleeved in a folder of tan card, were jiggling and working themselves out of the wooden racks on the far side of the blacked out room. There were thousands of them, each one the master exposure of one of Bakunin's hololiths. The first yanked clear of the shelf as if tugged by a sucking force, and I expected it to shatter on the floor, but it floated in the air. Quickly others followed suit. Light from sources I couldn't locate played in the air, casting specks and flashes of colour all around. The air itself became dark brown, like tobacco.

I raised my sword. A negative plate came flying at my head and I struck at it. Shards of glass flew in all directions. Another came at me and I smashed that too. More flew from the shelves like a spray of playing cards, whipping through the air towards me. I made a series of quick *uwe sar* and *ulsar* parries, bursting the glass squares as they struck in. I missed one, and it sliced my cheek with its edge before hitting the wall behind me like a throwing knife.

'Get him out of here!' I yelled to Alizebeth. The trailer was shaking. Outside there was a crash of thunder and rain started to hammer on the low roof. The hurtling plates were driving me back, and Barbarisater had become a blur in my hands as it struck out to intercept them all.

Then the ghosts came. Serious men in formal robes. Gentlewomen in long gowns. Solemn children with pale faces. A laughing innkeeper with blotchy cheeks. Two farmhands, with their arms around each other's shoulders. More, still more, shimmering in the dirty air, made of smoke, their skins white, their clothes sepia, their expressions frozen at the moment they had been caught by the camera. They clawed and tugged at me with fingers of ice, pummelled me with psychokinetic fists. Some passed through me like wraiths, chilling my marrow. The malevolence hiding in that little trailer was conjuring up all the images Bakunin had immortalised in his career, ripping them off the negative plates and giving them form.

I staggered back, tears appearing in my cloak. Their touch was as sharp as the edge of the glass plates. Their hollow screaming filled my ears. Then, with a sickening lurch, the world itself distorted and changed. The trailer was gone. For a moment I was standing on a sepia shoreline, then I was an uninvited guest at a country wedding. My sword hacking and flashing, I stumbled on into a baptism, then a colourised view of the Atenate Mountains, then a feast in a guild hall. The ghosts surged at me, frozen hands clawing. The innkeeper with the blotchy cheeks got his icy fists around my throat though his face was still open in laughter. I chopped Barbarisater through him and he billowed like smoke. A sad-faced housemaid pulled at my arm and a fisherman struck at me with his boat hook.

I began to recite the Litany of Salvation, yelling it into the leering faces that beset me. A few crumpled and melted like cellulose exposed to flame.

I heard gunshots. Gabon was to my right, firing his weapon. He was standing on the pier at Dorsay at sunset, in the middle of a inter-village game of knockball, and a harvest festival, all at the same time. The conflicting scenes blurred and merged around him. A bride and her groom, along with five mourners from a funeral and a retiring arbiter

constable in full medals, were attacking him.

'Get back!' I yelled. Barbarisater was glowing white-hot. Thunder crashed again, shaking the earth. Gabon shrieked as the bride's fingers ripped through his face, and as he stumbled backwards, whizzing glass plates chopped into him like axe heads.

His blood was in the air, like rain. It flooded into the ghosts and stained their sepia tones crimson and their pale flesh pink. I felt fingers like knives draw across the flesh of my arms and back. There were too many of them.

I couldn't trust my eyes. According to them, I was standing on a riverbank, and also the front steps of an Administratum building. The locations overlaid each other impossibly, and neither was real.

I leapt, and lashed out with my blade. I hit something, tore through and immediately found myself rolling on the rain-sodden turf behind the trailer.

Lightning split the darkness overhead and the rain was torrential. The storm and the bizarre activity around Bakunin's booth had sent the commonfolk fleeing from the meadow. The trailer was still vibrating and shaking, and oily brown smoke was gushing from the hole in the side wall I'd cut to break my way out. Inside, lights crackled and flashed and the phantom screaming continued. The warptaint was berserk.

Bakunin appeared, looking desperate, with Alizebeth close behind him. He put his hands to his mouth in shock at the sight of me torn and bloodied.

'Where is it?' I snarled.

'Third shelf up, above the workbench,' he stammered. 'The green bottle. I needed tincture of mercury, years ago, years ago, and an old woman in one of the villages gave it to me and said it would do as well. I use it all the time now. The emulsions it mixes are perfect. My work has never been better.'

He looked down at the grass, shaking and horrified. 'I should have realised,' he muttered. 'I should have realised. No matter how much I used, the bottle never emptied.'

INFERNO!

'Third shelf up?' I confirmed.

'I'll show you,' he said, and sprang to the trailer, clambering in through the hole I had smashed.

'Bakunin! No!'

I followed him inside, tumbling back into the jumble of landscapes and the maelstrom of screaming ghosts. Just for a moment, a brief moment, I saw Aen Froigre amongst them.

Then I was falling through another wedding, a hunting scene, a stockman's meeting, a farrier's smithy, the castle of Elempite by moonlight, a cattle market, a-

I heard Bakunin scream.

I deflected three more deadly hololith plates, and slashed through the thicket of howling ghosts. Spectral, as if it wasn't there, I saw the workbench and the shelves. The green bottle, glowing internally with jade fire.

I raised Barbarisater and smashed the bottle with the edge of the shivering blade.

The explosion shredded the inner partition wall and lurched the trailer onto its side. Dazed, I lay on the splintered

wall, sprawled amongst the debris of glass and wood.

The screaming stopped.



SOMEONE HAD called the local arbites. They moved in through the crowds of onlookers as the last of the rain fell and the skies began to clear.

I showed them my credentials and told them to keep the crowd back while I finished my work. The trailer was already burning, and Alizebeth and I threw the last few hololith prints into the flames.

The pictures were fading now. Superimposed on each one, every portrait, every landscape, every miniature, was a ghost exposure. An after-image.

Bakunin, screaming his last scream forever. ■

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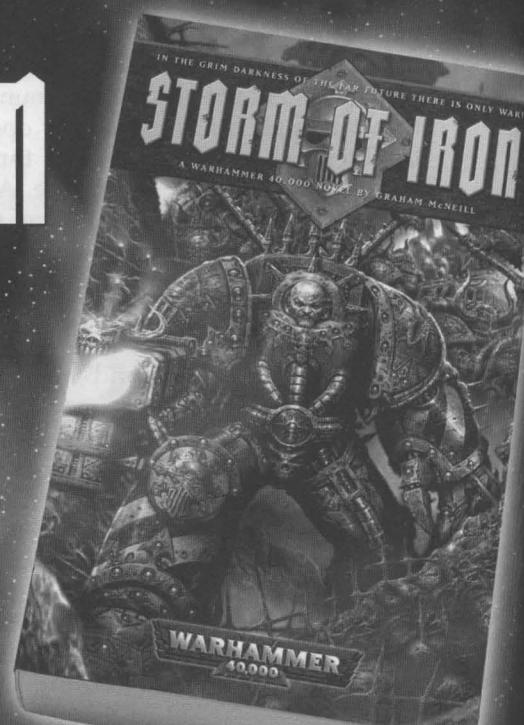
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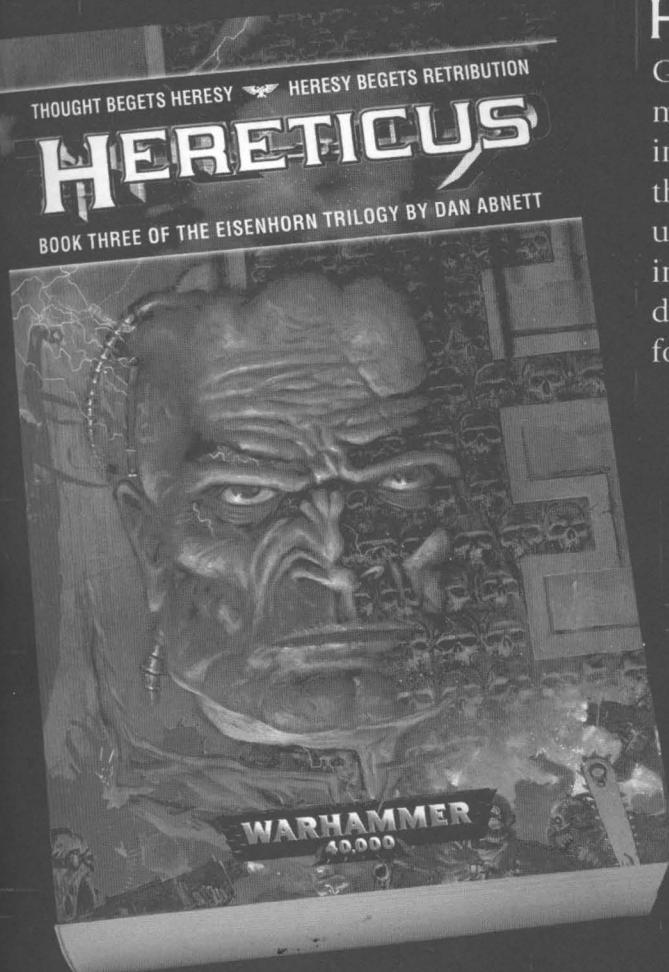
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THE SOUND OF screaming crows drew Angelika Fleischer onward and downward, deeper into the ravine. Where the birds fed, she would find her quarry. She threaded her way through mossy trees, their trunks riddled with rot. Pounding rain had given way to half-hearted drizzle; on dying branches, the water formed itself into heavy drops. Angelika, thin of limb, high of cheekbone, sharp of jaw, reached up to push a grasping branch out of her way. Her hair was a damp, dark mop. She wore black leggings under a soiled grey tunic, which was too long for her, and tied at her waist so its tails became a skirt. High boots, worn but sound, hugged her calves. An old brown jacket clung to her back, its scarred and cracking leather stretched tightly between her shoulders' sharp blades.

The branch she'd moved snapped back to smack the forehead of the young man struggling to follow her. Franziskus cried out in protest, wiping rainwater from his fine and noble features. He wore the sad vestiges of a junior officer's uniform from rustic Stirland's armies but his once-fine coat had lost much of its golden threading; several roughly-patched holes, as well as the dark remnants of well-scrubbed bloodstains, marred its green fabric. His face was handsome but still slightly round and boyish and his blondish hair, once impeccably groomed, now dangled long and lank from his large, aristocratic head. The rain had plastered a curling ringlet to the middle of his brow.

Angelika paid no heed to the young man's voiceless protests. She'd warned him not to come. He'd make a nuisance of himself when she got where she was going.

He was, at least, smart enough not to complain aloud to her. She ducked under another damp branch, sending it flinging incidentally backwards. This time she heard no wet thwack of branch making impact; Franziskus was getting better at dodging.

The cawing grew louder. Behind her, Franziskus slipped, his boot twisting and sliding along rain-slicked grass. Angelika twisted his way, raising a finger to her lips. Franziskus grabbed onto a young tree's thin trunk and arrested his slide.

'Stay here,' she hissed, turning from him and advancing into a skiff of fog. Carrion birds, perched on logs and branches, eyed her jealously.

No need for fear, she thought; the spoils I seek are not the same as yours. She looked down and there was a dead hand under her foot. She lifted it to survey the entire, mud-spattered body. It was human. Its face stared up, still shocked at what had befallen it. She could tell from the ragtag uniform that the man had been a mercenary. Angelika crouched down to make sure that the only movements around her were those of the crows. Satisfied, she rose to examine the other bodies. They, too, appeared to be dogs of war. This boded well; though their clothing was shabby, sell-swords such as these were the likeliest to have gold hidden in their boots or gems glinting in their teeth.

She beckoned Franziskus to join her, though she didn't care if he took her up on the invitation. He'd made his self-righteous aversion to her livelihood more than evident in the weeks since she'd rescued him, lying like one of these corpses, on a



An Angelika Fleischer Story • by Robin D. Laws

field of battle a little further down the throat of the Blackfire Pass. He stepped fastidiously toward her. Abruptly, a crow rose from a dark, wet rock and flapped its wings at the young man's face.

'Sigmar's eyes!' he cried, taking in vain the name of his Imperial deity. He defended himself from the bird with windmilling arms. Having made its territorial point, the crow circled in victory and lighted again deeper into the stand of corpses. It found an eyeball that the others had missed, plucked it from its socket, and let it roll down the length of its beak and into its gullet.

Franziskus stood beside Angelika and shuddered. He shook his head with the theatrical sorrow of a novice priest. 'Nothing good will come of this consort with the dead.'

'I beg to differ,' Angelika replied, squatting over the first body she'd found. She pulled on the dead man's right boot. It held to its master's leg with a miser's tightness. Angelika strained. She fell into the mud, on her behind. Boot in hand, she looked up at Franziskus, to catch him mocking her. But no, he was too great a stick in the mud for that; his expression was merely pained. She scrabbled up onto her haunches and over to the foot she'd exposed. Sure enough, there was booty there: a large ring, made of incised silver, with a trio of red gems mounted in it encircled the mercenary's big toe. There was still plenty of play between ring and toe; it must have originally been forged for some thick-fingered dwarf she decided. It slipped easily off and into the leather pouch that hung on Angelika's bony hip. 'We've found ourselves a rich haul today. You can see who these men are.'

'Mercenaries. The pass crawls with them. They fight to honour neither god nor empire, but merely to line their greasy purses.'

'Which, for our purposes, is a fine and splendid thing. Men who fight for money often die with money on them.' She felt the first corpse for a purse, coming up with a muck-encrusted pouch. She withdrew from it four Imperial schillings, and a few coins from far-off Tilea. 'We'll dine well on the final fruits of this one's martial labours.'

Franziskus wrinkled his finely-sculpted nose. 'I won't sup on dead man's coin.'

'Suit yourself,' Angelika said, 'but I don't notice you doing anything much to secure your next meal. Perhaps this is something you should give some thought to. Forgive me for noticing, but your purse grows steadily leaner.'

'I am here not to profit from the slain, but to discharge my debt to you, by extending you my protection.'

Scanning the ground for the next body, she laughed a breathy laugh. 'Would I be rid of you if I told you that your protection is a hindrance, and that your debt exists only in your imaginings? If you mean to make me regret the foolish lapse that made me rescue you from those orcs, I can tell you: you've succeeded.'

He stiffened to attention, as if observed by some distant field marshal. 'I appreciate your effort to release me, but honour demands that I do my duty.'

They heard a noise, and silenced themselves. Though it reverberated across the rocky ravine and through the darkened trees, the nature of the low thwocking sound was immediately recognizable to both of them: it was that of a heavy blade hitting flesh and cracking into bone. An axe, perhaps.

Angelika held a hand out to Franziskus, urging quiet. She pointed ahead, showing him she meant to investigate. Franziskus opened his mouth to argue, but the chill in her expression look stopped his words. Shamefaced, he regarded his boots. A dead man's crow-pecked face returned his gaze, eyeless and reproving. Franziskus shifted his position and looked up into the sky instead, where grey clouds mixed with white ones.

Angelika was gone for what seemed like an age. Then Franziskus heard whistling. He knew the tune; it was a children's skipping song. He crouched behind a boulder. The whistling grew louder until eventually a tall figure stepped through the fog. It was a man, wearing monkish robes, frayed at the hem. He swung an axe in his right hand and held the end of a large sack, slung over his shoulder, in his left. A long woollen scarf hung around his neck, like a stole. Crude shoes protected his feet. His

head was long and narrow: its slightly pointed crown was naked, but a fringe of wiry chestnut hair ran around the back and covered his ears. Creases of veiny skin lay under beady, deep-set eyes. His upper lip protruded at the middle, driven outwards by a pair of oversized incisors. His demeanour was one of bland contentedness. Unusually for a person one might meet on the slopes of the Blackfire Pass, his face was washed clean, though his hands were spattered in muck, and dark droplets of blood speckled the lower portions of his robe. The head of his axe was bloody, too.

Franziskus sank lower behind the rock, drawing his short blade from its scabbard. He would wait until the man approached, then leap up and, surprising him, get his dagger in past the reach of his axe. If the man was fool enough to resist, Franziskus would—

He heard rushing footsteps and then Angelika's voice: 'Drop the axe!' she said. Franziskus rose, to see Angelika standing behind the man, her knife at his back. The man's eyes rolled up to the heavens, and he wobbled; for a moment, Franziskus thought the fellow might faint. He held both of his arms out to his side and dropped both the weapon and the sack. It fell heavily into the mud.

'If you want to make yourself useful,' Angelika called out to Franziskus, 'then come here and help me keep watch on this person.'

Franziskus moved toward them, picking his fastidious way through the corpses. As a unit, the crows retreated to the surrounding trees. They cawed their annoyance at him for disturbing their meal.

Finally the man spoke, sputtering out his words: 'I am not a person who requires to be kept watch upon. Rather, it seems to me that it is you who are the brigands and bandits here.'

'Identify yourself,' she said, jabbing him in the back. She used her thumb, but he jumped as if she'd stabbed him.

'It is Victor Schreber, the noted doctor of philosophy, whom you impertinently manhandle.'

Angelika looked to Franziskus. 'Have you heard of this man?'

Franziskus shrugged. 'My tutors pressed many books of philosophy into my arms, but your name is unknown to me, sir.'

'You are an individual of quality, then? In that case, I demand immediate release.' Schreber stepped toward Franziskus, but Angelika stopped him short, grabbing him by the collar of his robe. He made an undignified choking noise.

'Unfortunately for you, the individual of quality isn't the one with the blade at your back. What's in the bag?'

Schreber pointed his long nose to the clouds and sniffed. 'I merely collect samples for my scientific researches. Though of surpassing value to me, its contents are worthless to the non-specialist. See for yourself.'

'Franziskus...' Angelika ordered, indicating the bag with a shake of her head. Reluctantly, he made his way to it. He opened it up and immediately closed it, his face flushing with green revulsion. He gasped for air.

'What is it?' she asked him.

'Heads,' he said, eyes watering. 'Human heads.'

'Of course, human!' Schreber exclaimed. 'Why, the science of phrenology is at present in its barest infancy. We have barely scratched the surface of human physiognomy. It is much too early to even begin to contemplate the skulls of dwarfs, elves or halflings! Strict rigours must be observed!'

He had turned toward her, without permission, but Angelika shrugged. He was well on the way to proving himself a harmless fool. 'So you collect these heads as scientific specimens?' she clarified.

'Indeed, indeed!'

'A ghastly and unwholesome practice!' Franziskus said, fists tight.

Schreber's eyes swept from Angelika to Franziskus and back again, as if evaluating which of his captors posed the greater threat. 'But good sir, it is vitally important to understand the mysteries of the human organism. By studying anatomy, we can one day perhaps cure deadly maladies. Or, by good breeding, wipe out idiocy and the propensity toward mutation.'

Franziskus crossed his arms. 'It is obscene and against the ways of Sigmar.'

'I don't know, Franziskus,' Angelika said. 'It strikes me as no more useless than any other form of scholarship.'

'More than that!' Schreber said, stooping down to pick up the bag. He rustled around in it, pulling out a bloodied globe of flesh. Franziskus recoiled; Angelika succeeded in maintaining her composure. 'This, for example,' Schreber continued, 'represents a find of the rarest order. It is a Type Nine, with a notably prominent mandibular archway. Do you know what that means?'

'Humour us with an explanation.'

'A person of this type is known to be of a poetic bent, devoted more to feeling than to reason, and with tendencies towards pessimism and melancholy.'

'Especially now.'

The scholar ignored her jape. He reached into the bag for another sample. She held her palm out to stop him.

'You needn't trouble yourself any further, Dr. Schreber. The subtleties of your lecture are no doubt lost on us.'

He stammered, directing his attention once more to the sharp point of Angelika's dagger. 'Ah, then. You will see, then, that I offer neither threat to you, nor competition to your looting efforts. It is specimens I seek, not coins or baubles.'

Angelika looked meaningfully at his pouch, which was fat.

'Ah yes. It is true, though, that I have picked up the occasional item of value, which lay on the ground in plain sight, in order to fund my researches, which can be expensive.' His lips were flecked with spittle. 'Sometimes, you see, I have call to commission the collection of certain specimens which are known to me, but which require the — I see that I bore you, however. You wish me to hand over to you the contents of my purse, is that not it?' He handed it to her.

She threw it back at him. It hit him in the chest and bounced to the muck at his feet.

'What makes you think I'm some kind of common thief?' she demanded.

He gestured at the corpses all around them.

'Those aren't living victims, are they? I may take from those who no longer need their earthly goods, but I'm no back-alley robber!'

Franziskus chuckled but realized too late that she truly meant it, that this distinction was no joke to her. She narrowed her eyes and glared at him. He felt his face burning.

'Then I am free to go?' Schreber asked her, bowing experimentally to pick up the purse and the head bag.

'Leave the axe. I think I believe your words, but in these parts, trust can be a costly thing.'

'I quite understand,' said Schreber, bending low, exposing his teeth in a courtier's smile. He picked up his dropped items. He turned to go, then stopped. 'But wait,' he said. 'Now that I know you both not to be miscreants, but honest scavengers, a thought occurs.'

Angelika planted a foot on a large stone and crossed her arms. 'Let me guess. You're thinking of a specimen you'd like us to procure for you.'

Schreber bobbed his head up and down. 'Indeed, indeed. North of here, in the mouth of the pass, lies a village — a trading post, really — named Verldorf. Its people are redoubtable, surviving as they do in this terrible place without paying homage to Elector Count or Border Prince. Yet the anxieties of their precarious existence have clouded their judgment, so that they sometimes mistake friends for scoundrels.'

'You've been there, I take it, and secured a hostile welcome for yourself?'

Schreber's nods became slow and pensive. 'Aye. It was most distressing. They thought me some kind of ghoul.'

'A shocking error.'

This time the doctor's thick eyebrows twitched, as if on the verge of detecting irony. 'Indeed. I merely sought to relieve them of a burden, and at a generous price. Yet their hostility was such that I was forced to depart with haste, lest I submit myself to bodily harm.'

Franziskus put his hand on his dagger's hilt. 'You wished to loot their graveyard, for the heads of their relations?'

'No, no, not relatives — Potocki! Recently they caught and executed the dread and notorious murderer of that name, who for many years preyed upon the posts and fortresses hereabouts.'

Angelika had heard the name before; the locals associated it with a succession of crimes, from brigandage to child murder. No one person could have committed them all. 'You're sure it was Potocki?'

Schreber placed a thoughtful hand on the side of his face. 'To be truthful, no. But this is immaterial – I seek his head, not in vengeance for his misdeeds, but because he exhibits the most pronounced triple occipital ridge I have ever had the pleasure to lay eyes upon. I simply must add it to my collection. They have no further use for it, and I will pay you two hundred schillings if you bring it to my cottage, inside the walls of the Castello del Dimenticato.' Angelika knew the Castello; it was a fortress town to the south, lorded over by one of the self-styled border princes.

'A tempting sum,' said Angelika, turning so she couldn't see Franziskus, who was pleadingly shaking his head. 'Why so high?'

The scholar tugged at his collar. 'As I said, the villagers are a surly lot and no doubt they will seek to thwart you. Potocki's corpse dangles in a cage, across from the village tavern. The best course is to sneak in at night, open the cage, and remove the head. Naturally this involves risk – hence the generosity of my offer.'

Franziskus took a haughty pace in his direction. 'We are not grave robbers!'

Angelika stopped him, the back of her hand against his chest. She asked Schreber: 'You can direct us to Verldorf?'

The philosopher led them over a rise, where he'd tied a mule to a spindly beech tree. It was laden with packs; he rummaged in one until he found a quill, an inkpot, and a scrap of parchment. He scratched out a clumsy map to Verldorf, with the Castello del Dimenticato marked on it for reference. Their destination appeared to lie about eight leagues to the north, meaning a day's travel through the valley, two days if they kept to the forested shelter of the ravine on either side. Then it would take another half-day to reach Schreber's place and lay hands on his gold.

'Anything else we need to know?' Angelika asked him.

'The salient facts have been well covered.'

She walked away, waving farewell in the stiff-armed manner of a countess. 'Then go home and prepare your schillings, doctor of philosophy.'

'But wait,' Schreber said, loping after them. He cradled something in his hands. Angelika stopped; he handed her an iron box, with a hinged lid. She opened it; it was lined with velvet.

'We deal with no ordinary cranium,' Schreber puffed, out of breath. 'Not like the common ones I gather here, which I bang together in my carrying sack. Potocki's skull has already been mistreated, and may be in fragile condition. Transport it in this, to ensure that it arrives intact. Be warned: a shattered skull earns you no pay.' He took the liberty of wagging a finger at Angelika, but halted himself in mid-gesture when he saw her reaction. He turned and proceeded quickly back to his mule, muttering inaudible goodbyes. They stood and watched as he clambered up on the mule and guided it down to the valley.

'We aren't even sure,' said Franziskus, pushing damp hair out of his face, 'that he'll reach the Castello alive.'

'Maybe not,' said Angelika, 'but he seems to know his way around. And for two hundred schillings, I'll risk the waste of a day or two.' She handed the iron box to him. Its heft surprised him; he nearly dropped it. 'You have room in your pack for this,' she said, 'don't you?'

Attitude stoic, he slipped his pack from his shoulders. 'And why such a cumbersome container?'

'You heard him: he wants the head in one piece.'

'Then why this?' He opened the box to show her: resting on its velvet lining was a key and a padlock.



VERLDORF SMELLED of sheep dung and burning wood. The place consisted of cottages, a stable and a tavern. The buildings were made of mud-daub, with sagging, thatched roofs. Bleating livestock filled large corrals; animals warranted more space than people in this part of the world.

A wooden palisade, its pointed timbers grey and deteriorating, served as the village's main defence. Its gate was flimsy and its gateman drunken. In the event of a serious assault, the place would be pounded to matchsticks. The locals, it was clear, relied on the fact that the orc armies rarely got this far up into the pass. And when they did, Angelika surmised, they'd be too eager to smash through the Imperial borderlands to bother with this blemish of a settlement. The gateman hadn't even challenged them on their way in.

As the scholar had suggested, Potocki was not hard to find. A cage swung from a freshly built gibbet in the irregular expanse of muddy ground that played the role of village square. Inside, propped standing against the cage's bars, stood a mangled corpse. Its head lolled off to one side. Its lower leg was bent in two. The body's entire surface was blackened by fire. Angelika looked around, and, seeing no one, stepped closer to the cage. One of Potocki's hands was crushed to an unrecognisable pulp. His downturned face was frozen into a hostile grimace; lips, burned away, bared long and yellow teeth.

Franziskus cleared his throat: a man had appeared on the porch of a shop across the way. From a rickety awning hung a painted sign, depicting a sheep's head and a flagon. This would be the tavern; the man wore an apron and a worried look, and had to be its proprietor. He had bushy eyebrows and a swaddle of fat around his chin, though the rest of him seemed lean enough. Angelika made her examination of Potocki less conspicuous.

'Welcome to our poor, benighted village,' the barkeep said. His voice was soft; his speech, halting. 'My name is Ralf. We offer only poor shelter, but this is, after all, the Blackfire Pass, and I hope you will find my bunks better than none.'

'Greetings, Ralf,' said Angelika. 'It is refreshing to find an innkeep who does not over-praise his amenities.'

The taverner's anxious demeanour did not lift. 'Travellers in this part of the world can be quick to seek violent remedy, so I have found it prudent to prepare my guests for disappointment. Please, step inside, and relieve yourself of the weight of your packs.'

Angelika and Franziskus clomped up onto Ralf's wooden porch, which creaked loudly under them. Angelika adopted her blandest posture and hiked a thumb back at the caged corpse. 'Your display there – the impression it creates is unwelcoming.'

Ralf beckoned them into the tavern's darkness. He spoke in a lowered tone. 'It is an accursed thing. Do not speak of it.'

Angelika remained in the doorway. She watched Ralf's eyes flutter nervously over her shoulder, to the gibbet. 'But, Ralf, it's hard to concentrate on anything else.'

He put his hand on her elbow and gently guided her inside. He slid shut a canvas curtain, erasing the cage from view. 'I do not speak colourfully. We are forced to labour under its curse, but if you pay it no mind, it can have no hold on you. I know it is difficult, with such a thing, but I urge you to dampen all curiosity, leave early tomorrow, and expunge it utterly from all your thoughts.' He clapped his hands together. 'We have no private rooms, I am afraid, just a small sleeping hall with cots. It is unsuitable to a person of the tender sex, madam, but there is no better choice.' He gestured to the room's few tables, only one of which was occupied, by a woman who lay snoring on it, head in hands. 'Tonight we have gravy soup, and ale.'

Later, as they finished the meagre meal Ralf served them, the tavern filled with locals, eager for the soup. Angelika eavesdropped but heard no mention of Potocki, just talk of sheep and troop movements. More Imperial forces were said to be venturing into the pass, to disperse the massing orcs down south. Franziskus's pallor deepened; he'd been part of that campaign, but had since made no effort to return to his superiors for reassignment. Angelika was tempted to tweak him on the subject, but couldn't summon up the required cruelty. With a turn of her head, she informed him that she was heading into the bunk room. They were tired from the trail, and a few hours of sleep would better prepare them for their robbery.



ANGELIKA'S EYES opened. She rose from her stinking cot. Franziskus already sat up on the edge of his. She peered into the long, dark room to see if any other guests had joined them. She stood and checked each bed; there was no one. The village was quiet. All they heard were croaking frogs. She crept out to the open archway that led back to the tavern room. A gaunt villager, lightly wheezing, slept in a sitting position, propped up near the exit. Angelika winced. She retreated into the bunk hall, motioning Franziskus over to a small window mounted about a yard off the floor. It was shuttered. Gently, she tested it. It wouldn't open. She peered through the crack between the shutters; they had been tied tightly shut, from the outside, by a cord of some kind.

'Hold both of them, so they don't rattle in the frame,' she told Franziskus, her mouth close to his ear. She drew her knife from her boot and sawed at the cord. It was tough and springy, like leather. Angelika heard a faint sound, of metal hitting metal, and stopped. 'There's something dangling from the cord.' She thought for a moment, shrugged, and started up again. 'When I nod my head, open both shutters, quick as you can. But keep hold of them, so they don't slam into the wall.' She kept sawing; finally the cord snapped through. Franziskus opened the shutters and Angelika shot her hand out and caught the cord. She held it in her outstretched hand. Suspended from it were half a dozen pieces of scrap iron, tied on with short lengths of twine. Franziskus looked puzzled. She craned her head out of the window, pointing to the ground below. A sheet of tin, pounded flat, waited beneath. Franziskus nodded his comprehension: it was a makeshift alarm, intended to send a clattering noise echoing around the town if any of Ralf's guests chose to exit through the window.

'Making sure we don't sneak off without paying?' he asked her.

'We paid in advance,' she noted.

Angelika crawled headfirst through the window, eyes alert for additional traps. She hit the ground palms-first and rolled to a soft landing. She got to her feet, reached out for Franziskus, and helped him wiggle through. They stepped lightly across the

muddy square to the gibbet. The wind had picked up, and hissed its cold way through Verldorf's thatched cottages. Angelika put her hands behind her back and stood thinking of the best way to get the head out of the cage. A large padlock hung from the cage bottom, keeping its hinged door securely in place. She was no lockpick, so it would remain shut. But the bars of the cage were widely spaced: if she could get the head off the corpse's shoulders, she could then probably work it through the bars and be off with it. She inspected the gibbet, pulling on its central post to test it for give. Stony concrete had been poured around it; it was not a pretty job, but the gibbet would take her weight, which was nothing compared to that of the iron cage.

'Boost me up,' she told Franziskus. She handed him her blade. He got down on one knee for her, and she used him as her step-stool. She wrapped slim hands around the bars of the cage, right behind the body's head. The gibbet gave off a wooden groan as it swung on its chain and Franziskus steadied it with his shoulder. Hanging one-handed from the cage, Angelika reached out for her knife; Franziskus moved to place it in her palm.

Then Potocki's corpse jolted into action. It lunged at Angelika, clawing at her throat with its one intact hand. Franziskus dropped the dagger; he dove to the ground to recover it. Angelika let go of the cage, but the creature seized her jacket and yanked on it, sending her head pitching into the metal bars. She got her elbow between her face and the cage, cushioning the blow. With jagged fingernails, the undead beast raked at her arm. He tore open the fabric of her jacket. He seized it; she struggled free. The cage swung violently, clipping a kneeling Franziskus on the back and sending him sprawling into the mud. Angelika hung from the cage like a marionette; she got her free arm out of its jacket sleeve, and now worked to wrench herself out of the one the monster held. She jerked and twisted as the creature snapped at her with its teeth. Finally she dropped free, crashing to the ground.

She sat there, looking up at the beast, grateful at least that it wasn't screaming. Maybe she could get her jacket away from it and sneak back into the bunk room, so

none of the villagers would know. Or perhaps they should just clear out, and forget their two hundred schillings. One thing was certain: if she did get the head, her price was going up. Schreber should have warned her. She could have been killed. The creature opened its mouth wide, and Angelika saw why it couldn't alert the locals – they'd cut its tongue out.

It hurled itself against the bars, rattling the chain that held cage to gibbet. The sound echoed. Villagers poured from their huts, armed with crooks and hayforks. Franziskus leapt up, but Angelika stayed seated on the cold dirt. The Verldorfers pointed the tines of their forks at her throat and chest, or stood ready to bash her with their crooks. They surrounded Franziskus, too; he held his hands out beside him, far from the scabbards of his dagger and rapier.

Angelika shook her head. She blinked. 'Where am I? What has happened?' She hoped Franziskus was clever enough to follow suit.

A gaunt woman with dusky skin thrust the blunt end of a pole at her; she might be considered beautiful, were she equipped with a few more teeth. 'You know where you are, harlot! It is Verldorf, and you do the Dark Gods' work!'

Angelika rubbed her forehead. 'Verldorf – why, yes, I begin to remember...' The villagers looked to one another for guidance; a few stepped back. Angelika smelled guilty consciences. Even the toothless woman moved a pace to the rear. 'I slept, in there!' Angelika cried, pointing at the open shutters, which provided punctuation by banging in the wind. 'Then I thought I dreamed –' She regarded Potocki, who was still, but had shifted position. 'Yes, this thing, this beast, it is alive! It beckoned to me!'

Without warning, she sprang up, seizing Ralf the innkeeper by the tunic and sticking her blade to his throat. 'Why did you not warn me of this foul thing's sorcery? It stole into my dreams and lured me nearly to my death!' The others sidled back, making a wide ring around her. Off to the side, she noted that Franziskus stood with eyes shut and head down.

'I beg pardon, madam!' Ralf cried, struggling to kneel, though her tight hold on his shirt brought him short. He clasped his hands in supplication. 'We should have warned you, it is true! Forgive us – we are afraid to speak its name, or even think of it. It haunts us; we are cursed!'

'Tell me of this thing, and I'll decide if forgiveness is warranted.'

'For decades it has stalked us! We cannot kill it! First, it sent minions: cripples, gypsies, madmen! They waylaid our shepherds, put hands on our children. One by one, we slew them. Then the beast itself came. It could leap over a house or break a man's neck with its empty hands! It ambushed our headmen; it set us against one another. Sometimes it even stole our blood, to drink!'

A few of the onlookers joined together to underscore Ralf's words with a rising wail of lamentation; it prickled the fine hairs on the back of Angelika's neck. She released him.

Ralf shook his head. 'Many times he came, and many times we fought him. We pierced him with sharpened stakes, and he dug himself up from the grave we made him. We burned his flesh, yet still he walked. We drowned him. We broke his bones. He casts spells on us if we lapse in diligence, and fail to keep his tongue trimmed down. The only safe place for him is in that cage. And now we see that, even with his tongue out, he can still creep into the minds of unprepared strangers. Please absolve us of our ignorant crime of omission!'

Franziskus caught her gaze; he was cocking an eyebrow at her. 'Very well,' Angelika said. 'In the face of such implacable evil, your error is understandable. What was it that first brought Potocki's wrath on you?'

'Our grandfathers could tell you, perhaps. Some say one of our ancestors offended him. Others claim he came here in search of an ancient text, abandoned here by a mysterious traveller. Which we did not have, because one of us had foolishly burned it, as kindling.' He stooped to pick up a stone, which he pitched at the cage; it went between the bars but missed Potocki. Through the creature's jagged teeth, a hiss escaped.

In an exaggerated gesture, Angelika craned her neck to gaze into the lightless sky. 'We would leave immediately, but night travel is too dangerous. We'll retire to your bunks for now, though I doubt either of us will sleep.'

'Shall we stay up and stand guard?'

'Please don't; though I've accepted your apology, my anger toward you has not entirely subsided.'

Ralf nodded. He spotted the metal alarm for the shutter doors, lying near the cage. While seeming to look the other way, Angelika watched him pick it up.

Angelika and Franziskus headed into the bunk room again; Ralf and his fellow villagers formed an escort. Once inside, she stationed herself beside the window. She listened as Ralf, back outside the building, replaced the shutter's alarm device.

'You've made me an accomplice in dark deception,' Franziskus said.

'That's the sort of thing that happens when you decide to follow a person like me.'

She sat and waited until snores reverberated between the hovels of Verldorf. She reached out to cut the alarm cord. Again, Franziskus opened the shutters and she caught the bits of metal. She slid out of the window. He followed. She crept to the cage. From her pouch, she withdrew a large key, which she'd liberated from Ralf's pocket as she'd held him at knifepoint. She slid it into the lock at the bottom of Potocki's cage, turned it and swung the cage door open. She stood her ground and bared her teeth. Potocki leapt out at her. She sidestepped. Potocki hit the dirt where she'd been, landing on his face. She dove onto his back. Franziskus jumped to seize his kicking legs. She grabbed the corpse's matted hair and pushed his head into the mud. He bucked powerfully. Angelika took her knife and placed it on the back of Potocki's neck. She leapt up, then fell, so that her entire weight pressed on the blade. She opened a gash in Potocki's neck that went clear to the bone and kept hacking; there was no blood, and the dried flesh came off in chunks. Franziskus fell back as Potocki kicked him in the chest. The head came off. Verldorfers streamed forth from their doorways.

Angelika seized the head by the hair and jumped to her feet. The villagers roared angrily. Franziskus gasped as Potocki's legs scissored around his chest. Angelika grabbed his collar and hauled him upright. A rock, thrown by the toothless woman, sailed past her head. She and Franziskus turned and ran. Potocki pushed himself up and sent his headless form charging at the loudest sound, the howling of the people of Verldorf. They shrieked. They pounded the undead creature with their clubs. Angelika did not look back.

The head, held by its hair, snapped at her. 'The box!' she said. Franziskus wrestled it out of his pack. He held it open as Angelika dropped Potocki's head into it. He slammed it shut. The head rattled and bumped inside it. 'A good thing the box is well-lined,' she said.



SKULLS LINED THE walls of Schreber's cottage. Some sat on shelves, but most were simply stacked in precariously vertical piles. The skulls of halflings, or children, which were the smallest, formed the top rows of each stack. The philosopher's axe leaned casually against the pile nearest the doorway. Schreber leaned against a short cabinet of polished teak; he had positioned himself so that it shielded him from Angelika and Franziskus, who faced him. Angelika held the iron box.

Angelika sniffed the air, taking in the delicious aroma of roasting meat. 'Preparing a feast of welcome for us, Schreber?'

'Ah,' he said, looking furtively at the open entranceway to his back room, 'that smell is in fact my cooker, where I remove the flesh from my fresher finds.'

'Ah,' said Angelika. 'Then that leaves us only with the exchange of our merchandise for your two hundred schillings.'

Schreber reached into a drawer. 'What kind of miscreant do you take me for? To do business with common grave robbers?' He pulled out a pistol.

'I was afraid you might say that.' Angelika had removed the lock from the iron box. She opened the lid. The head sprang out of the box, at Schreber. His eyes widened. Jaws snapping, the head sailed in a vigorous arc across the room. Its teeth clamped onto the front of Schreber's throat. Bright red blood spattered chalky skulls. Schreber fell, disappearing behind the cabinet. His screams ceased, replaced by the squishing of flesh gnawed by ancient teeth.

Angelika and Franziskus ran to the front doorway. They stepped outside the cottage, slamming the heavy wooden door shut, bracing it with their backs. The flailing noises they heard from inside continued for a surprisingly long time.

Schreber's home stood in a neglected corner of the walled town. The few passers-by they could see were some distance away, in a busier square, where marketers sold gruel and skewered beef from canvas stalls. There was no one to ask them why they leaned so desperately on the scholar's front door.

The thrashing sounds subsided.

'We can't risk its getting out and harming the townspeople,' Franziskus said.

'We can't take the chance of abandoning a possible two hundred schillings!' Angelika replied.

They nodded and burst back through the door. Once inside, Franziskus seized the handle of Schreber's axe. They couldn't see Potocki. They could see the legs and torso of Schreber's lifeless body.

'Here, Potocki...' Angelika said. 'Here, boy...'

The head came bowling out from behind a set of shelves. It barrelled at her feet, across a worn carpet. She leapt aside and ducked down, rolling the rug up over the skull. She kept at it, until the thing was trapped and unable to move. With the axe handle, Franziskus pounded the lump in the carpet. He kept hitting at it until the rug seemed to trap nothing more than a shapeless mush. gingerly, Angelika unrolled it. Indeed, Franziskus had thumped Potocki's skull to the consistency of porridge. The paste was grey, with a few flecks of pink rippled through it. Franziskus spotted a few pieces of still-solid bone in it.

He smacked those as well, until they were as gluey as the rest.

'Enough,' said Angelika. She stepped over to the cabinet, bracing herself against it to roll Schreber's body out of the way, giving her the clearance she needed to open its lower drawers. She started with the top and rifled through it. From the last drawer, she withdrew a purse. It was the one he'd flaunted back at the ravine. She opened it and turned it upside down. Rocks poured out. 'The occasional item of value, my foot,' she said. She gave his remains a dispirited kick. 'I suspect it'll be of little use, but we should search the rest of the place.'

Angelika pawed through all the drawers she could find. She checked under Schreber's bed and inside his mattress, leaving his sleeping quarters strewn with stuffing. She cleared his shelves, opening each of his books to see if it had been hollowed out. Franziskus sorted through the philosopher's cups and bowls, but she thought his inspection less than thorough and went through them herself. She opened the lid of Schreber's cookpot, and grimaced. She even looked inside some of the skulls.

She took the pistol and put it in her belt. 'This is the only portable thing of value here.'

Franziskus stood, hands on knees, peering down at the glob of paste that had been Potocki's head. 'Look at this,' he said.

She looked. She could see nothing.

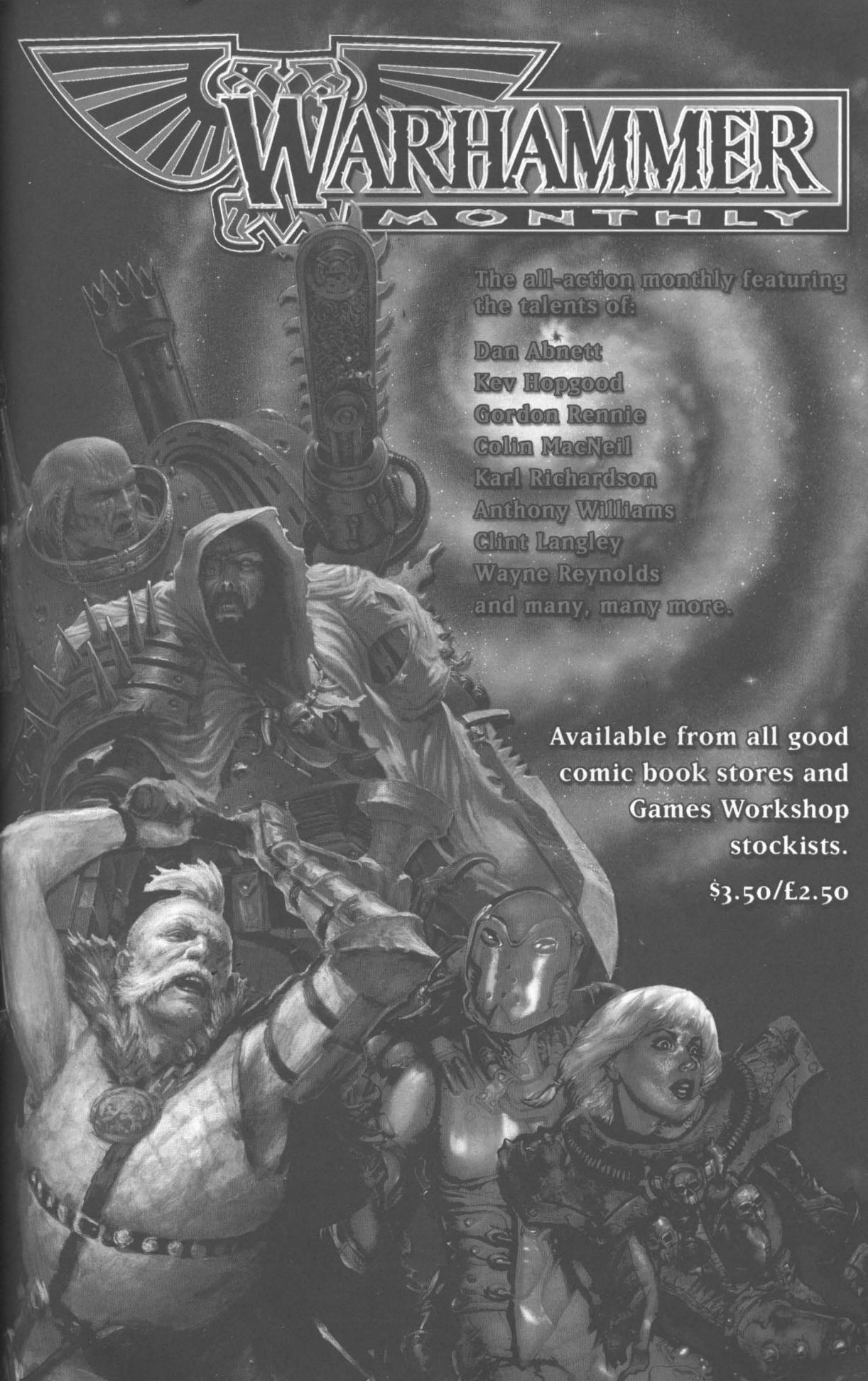
'See? It has moved. It has travelled several inches, toward the doorway, in just the time you've been searching.'

Angelika nodded. She had to agree; the crushed skull had inched ahead.

'Where does it think it's going?' Franziskus asked.

She straightened, got her bearings, and performed a quick calculation. 'Verldorf,' Angelika Fleischer said. 'It intends to reunite with the rest of him. And, my guess is it will - in about a hundred and twenty-five years.'

She stepped over it and left the cottage, doing nothing further to impede its progress. 



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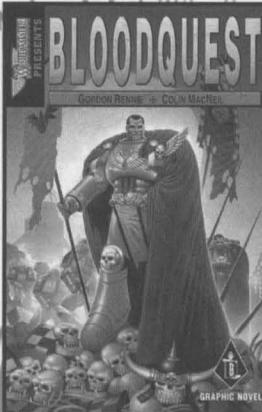
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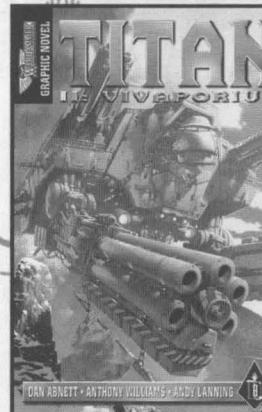


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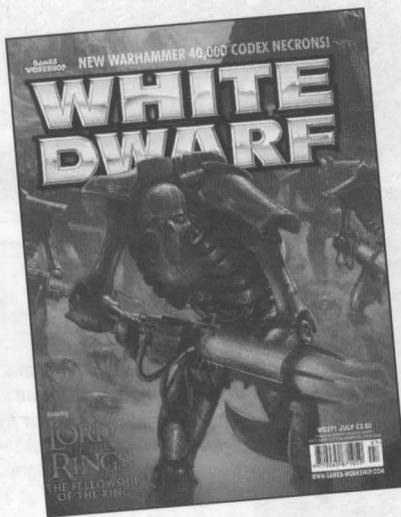
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NAH, MISSED
'IM AGAIN. ZOGGIN' SQUIG'S GOT THE LUCK OF MORK. NEVER MIND, LADZ, BETTER LUCK TOMORROW, RIGHT? THAT'S ASSUMIN' THE FLYBOYZ DONT GET 'IM FIRST...

AND SO THE ORDER GOES OUT TO THE BRAVE FLYBOYZ
OF WARBOSS BADTHUG'S FIGHTA-BOMMER SKWADRON...



FLAMIN'
MORK, BOSS! THEM
GITZ FROM KANNIBAL
SKWADRON 'AVE BEAT
US TO IT!

HEH HEH
NOT A PROBLEM,
GIMZOD...

OLD BADTHUG
SAID WE WAS TO DO ANYTHING
TO KAPTURE THEM BATTLE PLANS,
DIDN'T 'E?

DAKKA
DAKKA
DAKKA
DAKKA
DAKKA

'AVEN'T
YOU EVER 'EARD
OF KOLLATERAL
KASUALTIES?

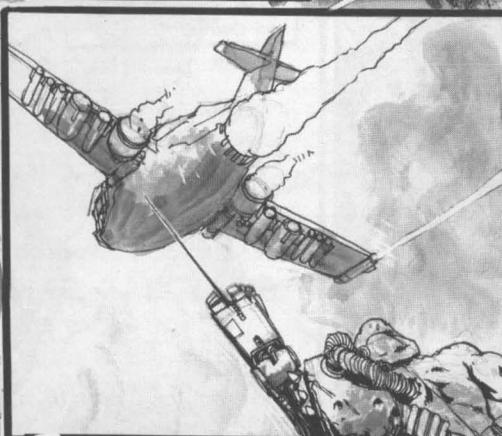
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71 KONFIRMED KILLS TO HIS CREDIT...

...INCLUDING 24 FROM
HIS OWN SIDE.

38 MISSIONS FLOWN, 38 REPLACEMENT
FIGHTA-BOMMERZ REQUIRED AFTERWARDS.

FA-DOOOM!

THIS MISSION WILL BE
NO EXCEPTION TO
THAT FINE RECORD.



KILLBOY
TO KOMMANDA
UZGOB, I'M REJOINING
THE FORMATION
NOW!

WITH THE WHOLE OF THE SKWADRON
ASSEMBLED, THE PURSUIT OF THE VITAL
BATTLE PLANS BEGINS IN EARNEST...

CEASE FIRE,
YOU GITZ, I'M RIGHT
ON HIS TAIL!

RAZGUTS, UZGOBS SCHEMING GLORY-
HUNTING SEKOND-IN-KOMMAND.

ALMOST
GOT 'IM IN
ME SIGHTS...

JUST
A FEW SEKONDS
MORE...

156 KILLS KLAIMED.
KONFIRMED.

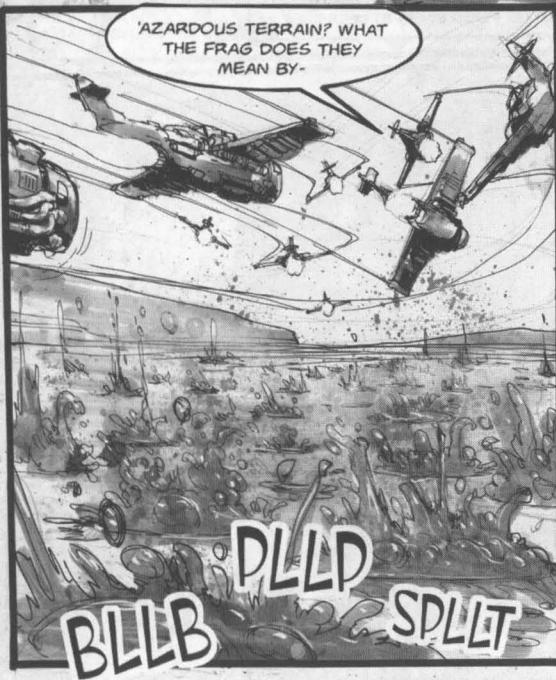
EVERY ONE OF HIS PROMOTION-SEEKING
SCHEMES ENDS IN FAILURE, EVERY
MISSION HE FLIES ENDS IN DISASTER.

JUST A-

AW FRAG

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by Matthew Farrer
& Edward Rusk

One hundred and fifteen days to liberation

Do not breathe.

Do not move.

The Emperor is my strength.

Faith is my shield.

By the Emperor's Grace I will be saved.

Here it comes...

HE COULD see them through the cracked and rusted floor of the pipe. Flickering glow-globes and the lights of the camp threw an erratic yellow cast over green hide and rusted armour, and then over tusks and stiff bristles as the sentry's pet beast began snorting and huffing the air for something it could not see.

The Emperor is my salvation. Challis made his hands still, fought to calm himself.

The yelping changed note and Challis realised it had worked. The rancid meat he had dropped behind the girder had confused the hound and buried his scent. He could hear footfalls again, but the greenskin and its bouncing, yapping hound had moved out of sight. Challis listened carefully, swiped sweat off his forehead. Twenty seconds went by with no returning steps, so he risked a quick crawl to where the pipe swung away from the wall and out over the hangar bay.

Or what had once been a hangar bay. Now it was a slave stockade, bathed in crude arc lights and full of the crack of whips, brutish bellows of command and the cries of the hopeless. Challis allowed himself a moment of rage. Abominations of nature. No mercy. Then he shook his head and focused.

With the sentry out on patrol the small greenskins left guarding the gate were screeching and squabbling and kicking one another's shins. Clinging to the top of the pipe, Challis inched forward in the dimness, every movement agonisingly loud to his tension-sharpened ears. He was almost above the stockade wall now, close to the limit of the protective shadows. Now or never. With another glance at the brawling creatures he dropped from the pipe, rolled and ducked behind the smashed chassis of a wrecked vehicle he had seen the greenskins careening around the corridors in. Heart pounding, he wormed his way under the wreck and lay still as advancing footsteps and the yells of the returning sentry put paid to the fight by the gate.

They had not spotted him. He allowed himself a grin. Unnoticed and in one piece, he was inside the slave camp.

Now, the trick of getting out again would be far more difficult.



CHALLIS HAD never been this far into the bay before, but he had studied the place from every perch he could find in the hangar ceiling and now he unrolled a mental map with practised ease. The beasts had ignored the maze of corridors and compartments in the decks and simply built a sprawl of shacks and hovels on the hangar floor as they would have on an open plain. Challis could even see a new one going up: in the middle distance a greenskin had bolted a frame together and was fixing rough metal plates to it, driving the rivets home with well-aimed blows of its forehead.

The layout was crude, but it had made the camp easy to scout. I'm... he glanced around... on the south side, so the slave pens should be... he squinted, there.

Slave pits would have been a better term. Huge holes had been blasted out of the deck, roofed over with tangles of wire and metal and the slaves thrown in with whatever clothes they had on their backs. Many were nearly naked from months of squalor and floggings, emaciated and broken-spirited.

There were greenskins on guard here, and Challis had to stay flat to the deck as he worked around the perimeter. There! A burning device the greenskins used to make the holes was still set up. That meant a new pit, dug for fresh slaves.

He snaked forward to see in. The slaves looked new indeed and were numerous – at least forty or fifty of them – barely wounded and most of their clothing intact. Those would be the ones. The others were as good as dead already. Back in the shadows, he slipped back towards the only shed that the greenskins kept locked.

A gap low in one wall let him crawl in, and his guess had been right – it was the ammunition store. Enough light came in through the rickety roof to make out piles of crude ammo clips, boxes of bombs, battered jerry cans of what smelled like flamer fuel. Challis tugged on a cord about his neck, pulling out the little handheld igniter he had stolen two days before. Looped at his belt was a length of tough, ropy creeper he had found could work as a wick. One end went into the valve on one of the fuel-cans, and after a couple of tries

he got a puff of yellow flame out of the igniter and set the dried creeper to smouldering. Adrenaline made his stomach lurch as he wriggled back out of the shed and scuttled for cover. You're going soft, he told himself, too used to fancy charges with amulet-clocks to time them and–

The wick burned faster than he'd expected – there must have been vapour from the fuel-cans in the air. The blast thundered all across the hangar, and Challis fled for cover to a string of booms and cracks as the other munitions blew apart. All around greenskins bellowed to each other and charged towards the flames.

Except one by the slave pen, looking distractedly at the fire engulfing the centre of the camp. Its back was to the mound of solidified slag left from the pit's digging.

Challis ran up the slagpile pulling two heavy black-bladed knives from his belt. A leap took him onto the beast's broad shoulders, sending it staggering. A second later both blades sank into its neck, cutting its bellows of protest to strangled gurgles. Challis vaulted clear as it staggered away, trying to hold its head on, and ran to the rim of the pit. Staring up at him in the brightening firelight, the slaves looked aghast.

'Who are you?' one haggard face demanded.

'No time! Let's go!' Challis began pulling the spiked roof-bars aside. 'You, the big one. Grab its weapon. You two grab those spanners. The rest of you, here.' A moment more and they began to scramble out.

Getting the slaves out by the route he had come in was out of the question, but he had scouted a path back from the main south entrance too. Its arch came into view between the shacks as they ran, gates hanging open but four more huge greenskins were on guard.

Challis made a quick count. About eight slaves per guard, about half of them with stakes, spanners or whatever they had grabbed on their way out of the pit. Not the best odds, but it would have to do. No time to go looking for more tools or bodies to strip.

'Right, Challis hissed, 'we go through that gate. Anyone here fight before?'

The hulking slave who'd taken the pit guard's cleaver raised his hand, another half-dozen behind him. Challis sheathed one of his knives and pulled a battered laspistol from his knapsack.

'The rest of you follow the armed people in. When I say go, you go! Any of you that can run past, do it! Don't play hero. Once we're past the gate keep heading along the corridor south. After a couple hundred paces you'll reach a fork. Take the left. When you reach the old torpedo gantry, jump down into the large ventilation pipe. It will drop you a few decks down near a waste reclamation plant. Go into the storage cells at the back and wait. Save any questions for after we're out.' He primed his laspistol.

'Emperor bless us,' whispered one of the slaves.

'We pray that He will,' Challis joined the rest of them in the reply. Then: 'GO!'

Running, Challis dropped the first guard with a frantic point-blank headshot. A burst of yellow gunfire in the gloom and two slaves convulsed and flew backward. The big man swung his cleaver down, forcing his target to parry as the other two were mobbed by slaves. Challis ducked low to avoid the sweep of an axe that took the head off the slave to his left.

One guard went down, but there were humans dead underfoot too. Challis shouted at them to go through and bodies raced past him.

The big slave and the guard were still locked together as another guard fell to a wild shovel swing. The last howled with rage as the slaves slipped past them. Challis thrust his knife but was knocked backwards – winded, he looked around and saw more charging towards the gate, while in the distance came the cough and roar of engines. And the last damned guard would not die.

Then the big slave lunged, turning his weapon at the last moment to bypass the guard's counter swing and sink the blade deep into its shoulder, severing its arm and splitting its body. It fell to the deck, bisected and swearing.

'We've got to go NOW!' Challis shouted. A shell whined over their heads.

The big man looked past him and saw what was coming. He gave Challis a sombre grin and hefted the cleaver.

'You go. I'll hold 'em.'

Challis bit his lip. The slave's bravery was humbling. He gave a nod.

'The Emperor will welcome your soul.'

'I gladly give it. Go on.'

Challis turned and ran.

Behind him there was a cry of 'For the Emperor!' against the roars of enemy, then he was into the south corridor. The left fork. The torpedo gantry. He paused at the lip of the pipe, hoping against hope to hear another human shout from behind him, but there was nothing but the inhuman babble of the greenskins and the revving of engines. Challis turned and dived into the dark.



YOU'RE GOING to have to talk to them before long.' It was one of the women, whippet-lean and green-eyed. 'One or two of them are about ready to drop, and another couple are about ready to fight each other.' Challis shook his head.

'We keep moving. They were stirred up already, prowling all over the hulk from half a dozen camps, and this will make it worse.'

They had come to a joist, torn from the ceiling and blocking most of the passage. The slaves crawled under it one by one, stiff and gasping. Challis swung deftly under it by one hand. When he stood up on the far side the woman was watching him still.

'You've been this way before. You know this passage. Do you know where we're going?' He shooed them into motion again before he answered.

'I came this way when I started scouting the slave pens. I've been along here a few times. And it's a lot like home.'

'Home?' Brighter light was filtering in from somewhere through rents in the walls, enough for her to see him more clearly. His hair and beard were iron-grey, his features grizzled, but Challis's skin was pearl-white, almost transparent.

'You're a hive-worlder. A down-hiver, at that.' She found the spirit to grin. 'I don't wonder you've learned your way around. You're in your element here.' He snorted and called ahead.

'Wait. See that spot where the metal's ripped? There's some lichen leaves dropped next to it as a marker. That's the one. Through there.' He turned at a tap on his shoulder; the woman had her hand out.

'I'm Hyl. Thank you for coming in for us.' His expression softened a little and he took her forearm in his old gangers' greeting.

'Challis. Pleased to have you along.'

The crawlspace was an old corridor, crushed to a narrow metal slot and tough to negotiate. It was twenty minutes before they had all passed through to stand on a mesh platform over a giant shaft that blew chilly air up at them. The going was easier here and Hyl soon had breath to talk again.

'I was taken from a ship that this hulk almost hit while we were in the Immaterium. The *Cezarro's Dreaming*. Bonded trader. My father was the chief steward to the guild household. We both dropped into real space and they sent boats out to board us. What world are you from? I didn't realise this thing was big enough to take a planet.'

'Vanaheim. Noatun Hive.'

Her expression changed. 'So Vanaheim's fallen? Throne of Earth, how many of those creatures are there on this thing?'

'Fallen I don't know about. This piece of trash somehow made it practically into orbit before any of the misbegotten bastards up-hive thought to check their scopes.'

'You're a ganger?'

'Not for a few years.' Challis tapped a tarnished silver stud on his tunic. 'Section Commander, Fourth Division, House Skadi Integrated Militia. They dropped onto the

hive and broke in at the shoreline. When we started putting up a good fight at the breaches, they dropped a chunk of rock into the sea just outside and sent a wave in that flooded the lower levels. Then they came back in and scooped us up. That's when they got my team. I don't know what happened after that.'

They fell silent as the group scrambled through a gully where the deck was wrenched up at a right angle. At the top of the slope Challis took them into a sloping tunnel full of metal flanges that Hyl realised after a moment were stairs – they were walking down one wall of a stairwell that was on its side. Several slaves were crying with exhaustion now; pulling, cajoling, and carrying one another, they scrambled to the end, crowded into the bottom of the well where a corridor soared straight up over their heads. Challis lit a torch from his igniter and the others flinched away from the sudden glow.

'Listen, now. Not far. Beyond this we'll be safe from any greenskins, even if the breakout stirred them up more than I think it did. But you're going to need to be careful. All of you get a torch from that pile. Good. There are some spares, get one in each hand if you can. Get them all lit. I made them to be used, I don't want to have wasted my time.'

He stood in a circle of torchlight.

'Listen well. Be quiet and careful. Watch one another's backs. Any movement, keep a flame between you and it and make sure people around you know you saw it.' He stepped back and reached into the tangle of metal wedged across a door that was tilted into a sideways slot. Hyl realised it was a barricade, lashed and riveted across the door and covered with a brutish alien scrawl, but Challis gripped a couple of struts that looked like all the others, slid them aside and vanished through the hole. Warm, musty air came out of the opening.

Hyl looked around as the others shuffled and looked fearfully at the opening. No one moved.

'The hell with you all, then, they' she told them, and clambered through the opening with her torch out in front of her. On the other side, Challis watched her stand up,

they watched the first of the slaves follow her through and grinned.



One hundred and twelve days to liberation

WHAT DID you mean when we first broke out, when you talked about them all getting stirred up? Hyl asked.

They were sitting in a dim oubliette behind a hatch that still closed. Their first torches had long since burned down, but Challis had pointed them to a stockpile of replacements and to a fire pit he had made in the hollow of two vent-pipes. The slaves were slurping water from a channel low in the floor and chewing on a bitter lichen that Challis had told them was edible.

'The greenskins? It's how they get when there's a fight in the air. There hasn't been as much squabbling between them as usual, but they still seem to get wind of a fight or a hunt a lot faster when they're bored. I wish I knew how they know when things like this are happening.'

'We think it might be mind-to-mind, sir.'

Challis and Hyl looked around at a slim boy, not more than twenty, the grubby remains of an Adeptus apprentice's braid hanging at the side of his head. He spoke nervously, as if he was unaccustomed to speaking to groups.

'We think they can talk to each others' minds like astropaths can. Ideas, feelings, they can... sort of ripple through large groups of them. It's how they can make armies so fast. And how they can get excited and wanting to hunt even before they actually hear the news that a group of slaves have escaped.'

'An astra-what?' said Challis. 'Talk sense, boy.'

'Sounds like witchcraft to me,' Hyl said, and made an uneasy face. Challis shot her a look, equal parts annoyance and confusion, until she noticed it and explained. 'My father's ship had its contingent of witch-workers - they let

starships steer, see where they're going, talk to other ships and planets. But I never knew greenskins had their own.'

Challis scowled at his own ignorance for a moment more then shrugged. Hyl was just realising that Challis had likely never even seen a space ship when he snapped his fingers and made her jump.

'That would explain it.' Both the boy and Hyl looked at him quizzically.

'I found a chamber near the outer hulk when I was first finding my way around,' he explained. 'Dozens of greenskins, scores, all chained together and filling the air with lightning. I saw one or two wyrds in the hive sumps back home, and they made my guts crawl in exactly the same way.'

The boy nodded in sudden excitement at Challis's description. 'Yes, the mutant offshoot! Psychics! We knew they must exist, but we never learned much about what kind of work they do. But what you are saying, sir and madam, it fits well.'

For the first time Challis took a moment to look the boy properly up and down. Had he had choices he wouldn't have saved this one - too thin, too frail-looking, scholar's stoop. But on the other hand...

'Fits, does it? Your name? And you know all this how?' The boy straightened a little.

'Korland, sir. I was apprenticed to the household of Magos Biologis Emmanuel Cort on Othera. I was compiling my journeyman's thesis on orkoid behaviour, sir.'

'Orkoid?' Challis asked. He looked at Hyl but she just shook her head and shrugged.

'Orks, sir. That is the proper name for the greenskins. "Ork."

Challis spat onto the deck. 'The bastard greenskins don't deserve a proper name!' The other slaves looked over then cringed away from the sudden boom in Challis's voice and Korland seemed to shrink visibly. Hyl broke the tension and clapped the boy on the shoulder.

'Oh, the irony, eh, Korland?' she said drily. 'Bet you didn't expect to be studying them from this close to hand.'

Korland hazarded a short laugh, and when Challis simply snorted he started to talk again.

'We were planning to pick up some of the creatures left behind on worlds they attacked. We got too far ahead and arrived at Vanaheim while the hulk was in orbit. One of their ships crippled our engines as we tried to get clear and their boats took some of us before the ship fell into the atmosphere.'

'You sure? The captains of the smaller ships co-operating with the ones on the hulk?' Hyl's tone was sceptical and Challis nodded agreement.

'They can't stop fighting among themselves, from what I've seen since I've been trapped here,' he said. 'They've even divided this craft into territories, as far as I can tell. Some of the greenskins wear different paints, like gang colours, though that doesn't seem to matter much. I've seen ones from the same bunch bash each other around a good amount.' Challis shook his head. 'No, the damn beasts are too dumb to co-operate.'

Hyl added her agreement in turn. 'You must have been boarded straight from the hulk.'

'I intend no insolence, sir, ma'am, but I am sure it was the smaller ship. That was part of our study, to find out how orks co-operate. Normally they don't, as you've seen, but you do find rivals co-existing when...'

The rest were gathering around now to listen, but Korland had frozen under Challis's gaze.

'When what, Korland? What are you saying has got them all working together?'

'I think there's a war on the way, sir. A crusade of some sort, catching up orks from all across the sector. The orks have a word for it, or we think... thought it might be a word, just a kind of bellow...'

Challis swallowed, took a deep breath. Hyl closed her eyes and bowed her head.

'I've heard of them, these great greenskin wars. Great Terra, what have we been caught up in?'

'That's why my master was trying to capture specimens, sir! We thought we might be able to divine the target of the war from them! It fits, sir – the migrations of orks from all around, we've been able to track them, the lack of infighting, the capturing of slaves to build war engines.

We just needed to discern the trigger...' Challis's gaze zeroed in on him again. Korland's voice faltered for a moment before he went on.

'A crusade like this usually has a trigger, a focal point, something to turn the orks' aggression outward. I think I know what it is.'

All of the slaves were looking at Korland now.

'The Adeptus Astartes, sir. Master Cort knew something of the ork language, and he told us what he had been able to discern. This hulk, other greenskin ships, they're all being drawn to a system where the orks are at war with the Astartes.'

Challis squinted at him, waiting for an explanation; beside him Hyl's eyes widened.

'The Astartes,' she breathed. 'We're going to be sent to war against the Space Marines.'

'Space Marines?' Challis said incredulously. 'The, what do they call them, the Angels of Death? From the stories and hymns? Lord Dante and all the rest? I've heard some of these names, there was a pageant every year at Noatun. All the tales paint them as gods-in-flesh. You're telling me that's what we're going to be meeting? In a song or a tale, maybe, but...' He looked to Hyl for support but she was shaking her head.

'They are real, Challis, trust me. They came aboard our ship once, long ago when I was a girl. They had come to save our convoy from...' Hyl stopped speaking and bit her lip. She raised her head up to look at the darkness above them and simply said, 'Yes, they are real.'

Korland had folded his arms, as if watching a slow student help an even slower one do their numbers. And as he watched, a fire began to come into Challis's face, the grimness turning to a savage joy.

'Do you realise what you're saying? Either of you? Did you hear that, the rest of you? Don't look so miserable, Korland: you've just given us something to fight for!'

Challis stood and walked around, facing each slave with blazing eyes.

'Don't you understand? This hulk's days must be numbered now! Listen to what Korland is telling us! The Astartes! The Emperor's own! No cowering in tunnels for us, not now! Think of what you have to hold out for! The day when the Astartes break this ship's back and come to free us! Liberation Day!'

Challis threw back his head and laughed.



Fifty-eight days to liberation

HERE WAS a human skull lying in a silt-drift where the corridor crumpled through an angle; despite herself, Hyl had been watching it for several minutes. She was getting used enough now to the fungus-light of these levels to be able to pick out shapes, although it had taken her eyes days to adapt. She had been terrified at first that Challis or one of the others would order that she be left behind as they moved through the Wilds.

Wilds. It had been Korland's term. A great wedge of old ship – Hyl thought it must have been a transport – driven edgewise into the giant wreck that made up the hulk's backbone. The ship was canted over at an angle, sealed off from the surrounding decks as it wrecked them in that long-ago crash, cut off from most of the power supplies, some parts airless and locked in lethal cold, much of it choked with rot and silt that had come from who knew where. When the greenskins had come they had filled the Wilds with their own fungi and feral beasts, closed up whatever openings remained and left them.

'These decks were their larder and their livestock-pen', Challis had told them. 'Whenever they needed to hunt food or catch beasts to fight for them they would come in hunting parties and seal up behind them when they left again. Shadowing the hunting-packs was how I got to know the ways in and out.'

The Wilds had also been a jail. Hyl shifted in her spot and looked at the skull again. No camps in the outer hull for Challis and the thousands from his hive: in the charge of a different slave-master than her own band, they had been herded into the Wilds and sealed there, perchance to be rounded up again at the end of the voyage but as likely to serve as beast-food before then. Challis had not spoken of how the other captives had died, and the darkness that took his expression at those times meant that no one had pressed him.

She shifted round and looked at the shaft behind her as voices drifted up it.

'It's working, sir. Damn, but it's working! Three more of 'em dead since yesterday and still not one of 'em looks like coming out on top. There'll be more to follow, I don't doubt.'

She could hear the wolfish satisfaction in Cantle's voice, muffled as it was. He had been a maintenance rating aboard his old ship, and knew how to slip through the hulk's crawlspaces like an oiled shadow. He had been spying on the orks that they had tried Korland's latest theory on: assassinate any large ork and its warband would neutralise itself for days, dissolving in petty brawls as the others fought for dominance. Impending ork-crusade or no, it seemed to be working so far.

Hyl leaned into the shaft and peered down, leaving Luder to guard the corridor with a captured ork pistol that it took the other woman both hands to lift, hefting it by the crude shoulder-stock they had had to make for it before any of the slaves could use it. Below her, the shaft ended in a flattened, malformed plug of metal and ceramite, three dead rocket-ports gaping up at her in the dimness.

It had been Cantle who first recognised it for what it was when they had discovered this shaft: a boarding torpedo, remnant of a long-ago Imperial attack. The shaft – Hyl looked up at the odd, lumpy walls where layers of decking had been half-melted and smashed aside – had been the tunnel it had bored deep into the hulk before it ground to a halt in this wreck's guts. Old as it was, it had cheered the ex-slaves, bone-weary after days of hit-and-run raids and ambushes against the greenskins in the

mazes of decking. It was a reminder that somewhere out there were humans, an Imperium, the wait for liberation day.

There were sounds below her. Cantle had squeezed out through a rent in the torpedo's side and was clambering out of the pit it lay in. Hyl caught his hand and pulled him up to the floor she stood on, and he grinned at her.

'Go on, hop down, have a look. Challis is in pretty good spirits.'

Hyl swung herself over the edge and felt her way downward. The air in the shaft still had a faint tang of oilsmoke: two weeks ago Luder had had the idea of burning stolen motor fuel in the airways, the smoke too thin to affect them but enough to blunt the fine noses of the beast-hounds. They hadn't bothered keeping the fires up since she and Challis had led a sabotage team to blow out an air-seal, opening the orks' kennels into space.

She hoped Cantle was right about their leader's mood. Lucky as the find was, she thought Challis still hadn't forgiven Korland for sneaking off – alone of all things! – to investigate the shaft during his assigned sentry shift. She could remember hearing their argument echoing through the little amphitheatre they used as a base.

'And you wonder why I was angry? This is not a game, child, or some scholarly investigation. Lives are at stake. We need everyone! That includes you and that bucket of learnin' you have. How dare you run off like that, without a word to Hyl, or me, or –'

But Korland had been unrepentant, not letting up until Challis had followed him back out to see the torpedo for himself. Hyl leaned close and fitted her head and shoulders through the gap. Challis was the suggestion of an outline around the little glow of his igniter and, peering about, she could start to make out the dim shapes of corpses, dried and shrivelled, still locked into their pews and sunken into heavy environment suits and carapace armour. Challis was braced against a column that ran down the middle of the torpedo, a column studded with what had to be weapon racks.

'I've got the lockers open, managed to get a look inside. Lasers and stubbers, a grenade launcher I think we can fix, hand weapons. Enough for about half of us. Weapons made for humans, not salvaged ork guns we can barely use.' Hyl clambered through the hole to join him, standing awkwardly on the tilted floor as he pointed to the compartments around them.

'There's damage to this thing. I don't know what caused it, but it looks like that's what killed the crew.' Hyl looked around. The torpedo casing was full of gouges and dents from its passage through the hull, and below her toward the point there was a great circular wound there the skin of the torpedo had been punched inward.

'But look up here,' said Challis. 'The ammo lockers on these things look like they're made to last, and I mean last. Lasgun cells will keep for just about ever, and I think there are even flamer tanks back there that survived the impact.'

Challis grunted with satisfaction as he forced a stiff clamp open and turned around with a matt-grey assault shotgun in his hands.

'We're going to be an army now, Hyl. Not a rag-arsed collection of escapees. Korland's words about the Astartes were an omen, right enough. The Emperor's grace brought us news of our freedom, now He's given us the tools to meet our liberators proudly. Weapons in our hands and the blood of greenskins on our fists.' But Challis's tone was still thoughtful, his eyes hooded.

'Something's still on your mind, though, Challis. What is it?'

'Cantle told me that starships have other kinds of these...' he gestured around them.

'Torpedoes.'

'Torpedoes. But they don't carry warriors, they carry bombs. That's what's preying on me now, Hyl. We can fend off these creatures until this hulk goes into its battle, but the Astartes won't know we are here. We have to find a way to make sure they come to free us instead of just firing on this thing and blowing it to pieces. We need to find a way to tell them we're here.'

Hyl took a breath.

'That's why I came to find you, Challis. I think I know where that chamber of witch-orks you told us about is, and I've been talking to Korland about it. I think we have a way to call the Space Marines to free us.'



Thirty days to liberation

WITCHCRAFT. Challis loathed the idea, loathed alien witchcraft even more, but there was nothing else for it now. Challis still couldn't fully accept that space ships needed sorcery to talk to one another, even after Hyl and Roland had explained it to him as best they could.

Ever since the gut-wrenching half-day when the hulk had fought its way back into real space they had been on edge. And when the scouts had reported a rush of agitated orks to the hangars and gun decks, and distant flares of light beyond the viewports, they knew a battle had begun.

Now he was back at the witch-place, crouched in a breach in the wall of what Hyl said had once been the Navigator cathedral. His eyes wanted to lose focus and the air tasted of metal and felt hot and cold at once and there was a constant pressured feeling as though they were in a fast-dropping lift. Witchcraft.

Spread out below them was the scene he remembered, no less strange for seeing it a second time. Filling the tiered pews were scores of greenskins, chained together with heavy copper shackles. Some seemed to be concentrating and muttering; others were thrashing and yelling, green sparks flying from their eyes and ears.

The great holograph globe hanging above the chamber was cracked and long broken, but occasionally when a sparking greenskin looked at it it would brighten with green mist and faint images, though the greenskins paid little attention to it. Pictures: outlines of giant craft against the stars or bellowing greenskins in what Challis realised with a jolt were other ships in the fleet.

Oh yes, this was the place alright. The place where these spark-spitting orks talked to others on other ships and helped the hulk's commanders see their enemies. The witch-powered aliens who, Korland had told them confidently, would die of their own excitement as soon as any fighting started, leaving the hulk blinded and the greenskins unable to communicate.

Fine. As long as they made some kind of contact first. The place had taken him a week to find again; the raid had taken three times that long to prepare. There would be one chance only.

The force of the orks' brains beat at his eardrums like surf in a storm, and Challis almost didn't hear the muffled explosion at the far end of the chamber as their bombs went off. Then smoke began to roil from several places along the walls and suddenly the air was filled with screams as the chained orks began to convulse and catch fire. Green smoke spurted from mouths, arcs of power crackled between ears, eyes lit up like emerald searchlights.

Challis kicked open the air vent and rappelled down the wall, the rest of his team behind him. Hyl's shoulder jerked as her grenade launcher recoiled, and flechettes stippled the skins of a dozen howling orks. Challis's shotgun boomed twice and felled a surprised attendant as Kelf's flamer lit the air behind them.

Challis felt his head being crushed in an invisible vice. Next to him, blood was running from Luder's nose and mouth. In front of them, two orks' heads exploded in showers of green light.

He ran to stand in front of the biggest witch-ork, forced himself to look the creature in the eye. Slowly, so that its brain would blast the image out into the minds of every astropath in the system, he raised his shotgun and spoke.

'My name is Challis. There are humans on this hulk. We beg you, help us in liberation!'

There were shots and cries from behind him, and he forced himself not to flinch.

'Please! If anyone hears this!'

And then, suddenly, the creature straightened from its orkish slouch and stood over him. Its expression changed, its

eyes fixed on him. As it spoke in a deep, oddly accented human voice the green steam around it seemed to curl into the suggestion of a helmet and faceplate, curved shoulder-guards and a great cloak.

'Human Challis. I speak from the battle-barge Ragnarok. You will undermine the turrets and defeat the shields for the wing of the hulk from which you speak. You will open it for attacks by my company and—'

Challis stammered to speak, 'W-we are poorly armed. I am unsure of where this wing is you speak of. I—'

The ork leaned over Challis, voice booming. 'Pay heed! The place you speak from juts from the side of your misshapen craft like a wing. It is decked with cannon and turrets, guns the orks will use to fire at us as we close the distance to storm it, walls of energy that mean we cannot teleport in to find you.'

Challis fought to think through the psychic yammer around him. He remembered the crater in the front of their boarding torpedo. How could he have been so stupid? They would fly at the hulk and their torpedoes would be shot at, breached, the great Astartes might even perish...

Above him the image faded for a moment as the witch-ork began to convulse, then sharpened and spoke again.

'We shall watch you, Challis, and mount our sortie when your destruction of the defences is done. Even as I speak we are in battle, and the defences must be open in thirty days or our attack may fail. Know that we will fight to liberate you, but know that you must fight too before we can reach you. Do you understand?'

'Yes, yes sir.' The gaze looking at him through the creature's eyes seemed to hold him like an iron clamp.

'We will meet thirty days hence, then. Farewell, human Challis.'

The ork's head slowly crumpled into fragments. Challis felt blood erupt from his own nose. There was a fizzing sensation under his skin. His vision swam as he looked around. With an exultant shout Cantle completed his adjustments to a half-wrecked console and blast shutters slammed over every door from the

chambers. In the flames and bedlam they sprinted for their tunnel as, behind them, the last of the orks overloaded in a deafening blast of green light.



Liberation day

UP AHEAD the barricades had gone up as he instructed. Behind them the ork mob rounded the corner, their fury seeming to intensify with every step, and all around came the distant boom of explosions as the slaves' sabotage did its work.

Kelf was dead, gone in the first of the great detonations they had triggered in the base of the bridge-tower. There had been more orks than anyone had been ready for, and just as Challis was realising that they would never be able to fight their way down the stairs to the power regulators, Kelf had kicked the drum of promethium off the edge of the catwalk they had been fighting on and leapt after it, turning his flamer on himself to become a dying, blazing detonator. They could only hope that the explosion had done enough damage to destroy the shields that the Astartes had spoken of.

The mob filled the width of the large corridor, shouldering one another aside to be at the fore. At the rear blue smoke jetted from the hulking, armoured greenskin pushing the mass forward. In front of him Hyl and the last of the others were already in place, and with a last burst of energy Challis vaulted the metal beams that formed the front line of the defences as hands reached to haul him up the last stretch of barricade.

Cantle and his scouts were gone as well. Their plan had worked perfectly, using baits and fires to drive a stampede of gnashing beasts into the shafts where the orks fed ammo up to their turrets. The guns had soon fallen silent but Cantle and the others had been cut off and lost, unable to get to the rendezvous point they had fortified. Challis had bid them a silent

farewell – he had no illusions that their liberators would have time to comb the tunnels for the missing. The message had left no doubt that the blessed Space Marines were going to have to fight their way in and out of even this one weak spot.

Challis dropped down the far side of the barricade and shots erupted around him: the deep chug of Hyl's grenade launcher, the roar of the high-speed ork cannon that Luder and Korland had learned to work, las and stub bursts. Challis scrambled to his feet and added the last of his shotgun rounds to the fusillade.

Last stand, he thought, glancing over his shoulder at the hull-wall behind them. If the blessed Astartes can't find us soon, it ends here. His shotgun was empty and the orks were a mere dozen steps away.

They'll not find us in time, not now.

The armoured giant was in the lead, shots bouncing off the metal plates riveted to its skin. Challis pulled his knives from his belt and readied himself, tears of rage in his eyes.

To have come so far to have it end like this!

In the last few moments of frantic gunfire the flash of light behind the orks went unnoticed.

The Emperor is my...

Until the shooting started.

A whoosh of flame incinerated the rearmost orks, the humans ducking down to avoid the wash of heat. The chieftain turned, roaring in rage, the motors on its armour rattling and smoking.

Challis lifted his head. Through the smoke and orks he counted ten great silver figures, stepping into firing poses and felling one greenskin after another with sweeping, methodical bursts. In a few moments of deafening gunfire the armoured chieftain was alone, green corpses piled to its knees, and the shooting ceased.

The ork revved its armour into a run and one silver figure stepped forward to meet it, racks of golden blades on each arm crackling with blue energy. The ork's swing never connected; the blue-gold claws turned the creature into a cascade of blood, viscera and metal plates, until after

another moment the silver being hoisted the carcass up and flung it aside. The remains flopped to the floor and lay oozing.

And in the silence that took the battlefield now, Challis could hear the explosions change note – no longer muffled and deep but nearby clangs and crunches that he guessed must be Astartes boarding torpedoes hitting home.



FROM BEHIND their last barricade, the slave fighters came out, silent with awe, to meet their liberators over the gore-splattered deck. In the clearing smoke Challis took his first good look at the great Marines.

Their dull silver power armour had golden trim, the eyepieces of the helms lit with a green glow. Challis looked for a name or badge to identify his liberators, but saw none that he recognised. Korland, frowning, had hurried to catch up with him and opened his mouth to speak. Challis waved him to respectful silence. He was grateful for the boy's brain, but a time like this needed no prattling, no matter how well-educated.

One armoured figure after another regarded his procession. None barred their way, but neither did they offer greetings.

It was the golden-clawed Space Marine, his armour glistening with ork blood, who stepped into Challis's way. The captain's helm was the same golden colour as his claws and the shoulders of his hulking suit were maned by long golden spines, decorated with skulls both old and new. Flanking him were massive figures in duller, baroque armour of a different design, the metal flowing from one plate to another in fluid, organic lines. Looking at them in delighted awe, Challis fell to one knee until the being gestured for him to rise.

Challis spoke first, using the formal High Gothic for addressing a superior.

'Hail Astartes! Hail to our liberators! I am Challis, leader of the slave revolt. We hoped you would come to free us. The Emperor, praise to his name, has answered our prayers!'

Several of the figures around them began to laugh. The sound chilled Challis for a moment before he realised what it must be. The Astartes were showing the joy of victory too. Despite their frightening armour there was humanity in them still. Challis grinned back at them.

The voice was a deep, flat baritone, in an antiquated accent Challis had to pay close attention to.

'And our greetings to you in return, Challis. I am Lord Sligianian, leader of this humble company you see before you. My praise to you, sir – you have led your warriors bravely and well. I have not seen the like for many a year.'

'Thank you, Lord Sligianian. We are honoured by your presence and your words.'

'Indeed you should be. Not many of your kind have gazed upon us this close in many ages.' There was a boom behind them, and the faint sound of gunfire. Sligianian cocked his head for a moment, listening to something.

'I would talk with you more, Master Challis, but now is not the time. Our position here is embattled, not a place to make conversation. The task at hand is your liberation.'

Challis bowed.

'Of course, lord.' He waved his soldiers forward. 'Step forward, all of you. Give praise and thanks! How are we to board your craft, Lord Sligianian?'

'Board? Why?' The giant Marine sounded vaguely puzzled. 'You, Challis, I may bring away with us – you, I have hopes for. But you must know that the liberation you have fought for has been brought to you – you need travel no further in search of it.'

'Lord Sligianian,' Challis began, hearing the puzzlement creeping into his own voice, 'are you saying that you will board and keep this hulk? We must leave it otherwise. I mean, true freedom is in faith and spirit, sir, but...' Korland was tugging

at his sleeve, mouthing something. Challis shook him off.

'We may take this creation, Challis, you are right,' rumbled Sligianian, gesturing at the walls. 'Ungainly as it is, perhaps it will be home for a little while. Perhaps it will yield up secrets to us, or perhaps we shall destroy it yet. Do not doubt that we can, now that your own actions allowed us our landing. A hulk is simply another fortress, Challis, and the fortress has not yet been raised that our skills cannot bring down. Our progenitors are ancient and noble. Our citadels are impregnable and our engineers unmatched.'

'Challis!'

'What, Korland? Show respect before the Astartes!' But the boy was corpse-pale with fear, and Challis's alarm deepened.

'Ah, Astartes. We were Astartes once, young one, but no longer. We forswore the title the day the Iron Cage broke Rogal Dorn's conceited puppies and we showed ourselves the masters of those who still clung to their old loyalties.'

Challis's alarm dropped into outright terror. Fragments of forbidden legends, false histories whispered of around barrack-tables deep in the night. The Traitor Legions. Astartes who had – unimaginable thought! – turned from the light and brought blasphemous war against the Emperor. He could feel Korland's hand on his arm, quaking uncontrollably.

'But... you promised... you said you brought liberation...'

Sligianian came to attention and clashed his claws together in a handclap. There was more animation in his voice now, a hideous good humour.

'You are right, young Challis, we must not delay. You have earned your liberation ten times over, you and these brave warriors of yours. Why, your resourcefulness almost reminds me of myself in my younger days, before my time as an Iron Warrior.'

Iron Warrior. The words hit Challis like a hammer. Beside him, Korland wrenched Hyl's grenade launcher from her hands with a shriek.

'Run! We are deceived! We are deceived!'

He never had time to fire. The machine-man forms beside Sligianian began to emit a crackling hum, and raised arms that changed before Challis's eyes. Fingers stretched to become gunbarrels, metal gloves flowed backwards into shapes that hinted at weapon stocks, magazines. Each mutant gun-arm spat once.

Challis looked around. The head full of knowledge that Korland had spent his young life accumulating was burst open, the boy's chest caved in. Blood pooled around the corpse.

Delirious with shock, all Challis could do was stare and whisper:

'Liberation. You promised.'

'And am I not a man of my word, Challis, whatever ingratitude your young companion insisted on showing? Theomandus, quickly, please.'

There was a cry from behind him and Challis spun about. Hyl was struggling in the grip of another armoured giant, this one wrapped in a cloak of spun silver, with eyes that gave off pale, twisting lights and a voice that was a soft, creeping whisper: 'For is it not written that "the common man is like a worm in the gut of a corpse, trapped inside a prison of cold flesh, helpless and uncaring, unaware even of the inevitability of its own doom"? Such a fate do we free you from as we bring your mortal flesh to glorious union with the stuff of Chaos.'

'Yes, indeed it is most well written and right,' Sligianian responded.

'And hath not great Perturabo proclaimed: "The spirit is a machine that is unlocked by Chaos. The Flesh is a fortress that we shall overcome"?'

Sligianian bowed slightly: 'Thus sayeth the Warsmith above all.'

Hyl had time for one more cry before a hazy wave of energy tore through her and she began to change.

Her mouth dropped open and a threefold tongue tipped in bone barbs uncoiled from it. Her body ballooned into an obese mass that writhed with parodies of her own face as her arms and legs withered to fleshless sticks and dropped away. And her clear green eyes stayed fixed on Challis's until, mercifully, the sanity left them and the sorcerer dropped

the squalling lump of flesh onto the deck.

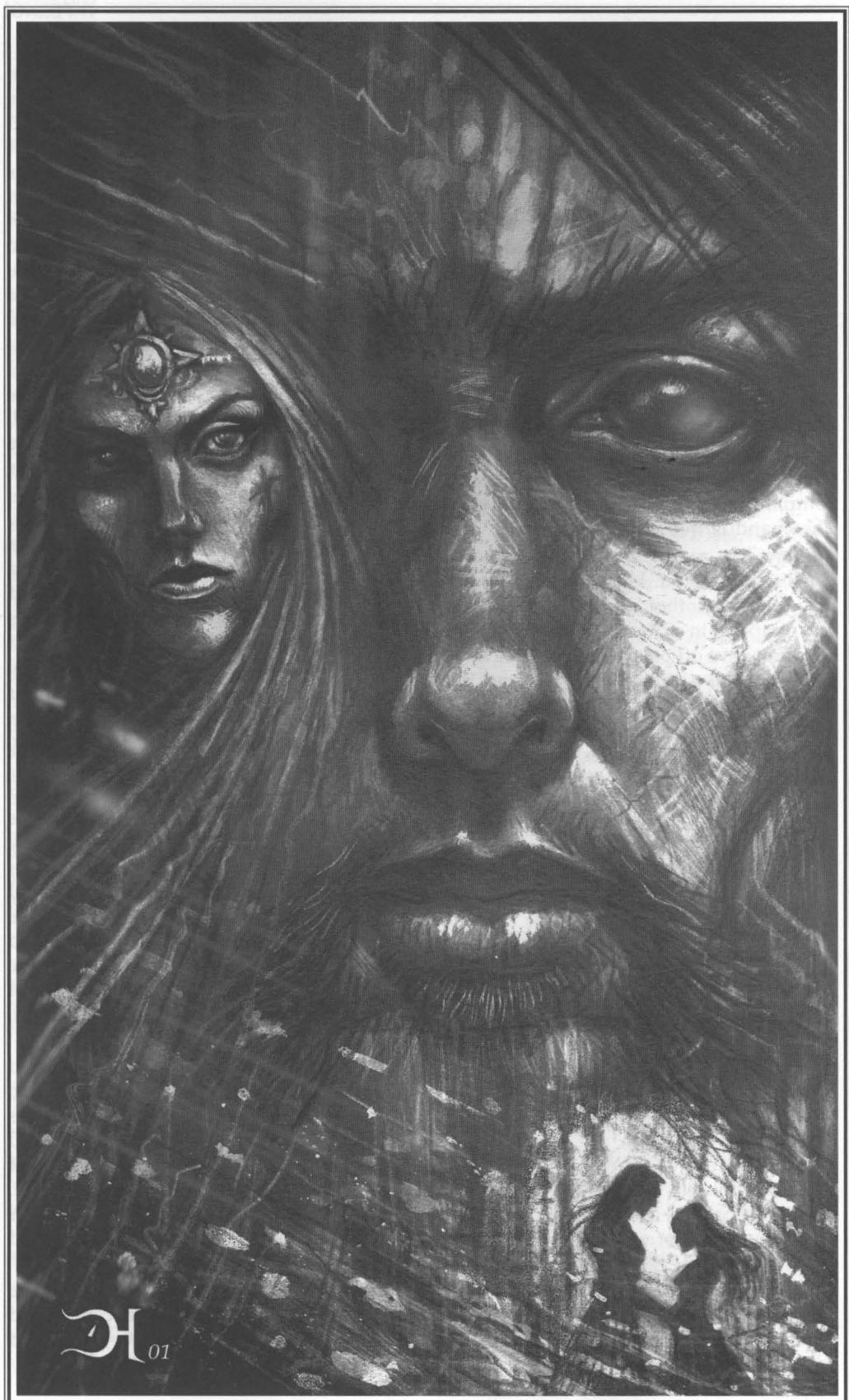
'And so these proud warriors embrace their freedom,' said Sligianian as the slaves were seized by the traitor Marines around them. His voice was soft, his tone not unkind. 'Your liberation from your mortality, the liberation you so crave from the rusted chains of your Imperium. A gift that so few understand, a gift that the ignorant fear and flee from. There have been worlds, Challis, where the people have risen as one and fought us when we have tried to give the gift that you asked us for. But when I heard of your call for help I knew we had to make haste to aid you. Truly, this is the gift you have all earned, Challis, and it is my honour to be the instrument by which you will have your sweet, brief taste of freedom.'

The sorcerer moved among them, taking each slave by the arm. Luder became a writhing slug-thing with a crest of dripping quills; the man behind her sprouted lashing tendrils from his mouth and nose and choked on them as his muscles swelled and their convulsions broke his bones. By the time the last of them had had their humanity wrenching away, Challis was weeping freely with rage and despair. Sligianian's hand took his shoulder.

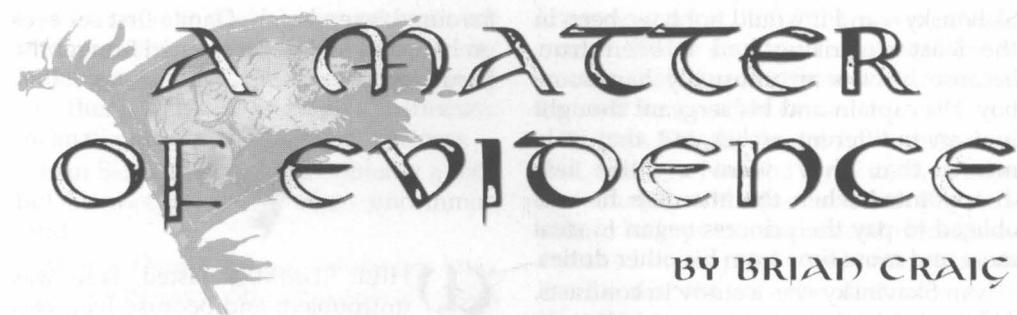
'I know, my young friend, it is a moving thing to witness. The corpse-Emperor has no sway over them now. But for you, my warrior, their leader and inspiration, a greater gift still. My flagship has need of slaves, Challis, the fighting with the greenskins has taken its toll. Be of good cheer, brave human – you have won the right to live out your days in the service of your liberator. Hold your head high, Challis. You need wait no longer.'

The servo-claws of the smiths closed about Challis's limbs and the screaming, weeping human was carried away. As his warriors moved to their pickup points Lord Sligianian looked back at the clump of struggling, yammering Chaos spawn. Nearly half were dead already as their deformed bodies gave out; the rest thrashed and howled on the grimy metal floor.

'It is good and generous work that we do, Theomandus,' Sligianian declared, and his sorcerer bowed. 'I am never so fulfilled as upon a Liberation Day.' ♦



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01



A MATTER OF EVIDENCE

BY BRIAN CRAIG

KISLEV IS A land where the ice sets as hard as iron for more than half the year, and where women as well as men have ice of exactly that kind to armour their hearts and their minds. Although there are some in the cities of the Empire who deem Kislev a barbaric land, the Kislevites consider themselves to be an unusually enlightened people, with a sense of justice second to none. This is not to say that they have an ostentatious regard for manners and etiquette, like the chivalrous knights of Bretonnia; their enlightenment and justice have more to do with the scrupulous precision with which they calculate debts, and the calm determination with which they collect them.

The first city of Kislev the nation, which is also called Kislev, is nowadays ruled by a tzarina named Katarin. She is a direct descendant of the Khan Queens, who swept westwards with the great hordes in the long-gone days when the east had not been laid to waste and tainted by foulness, but she is all Kislevite now. The cities of the north are fervently loyal to Kislev, but each and every one of them must be self-sufficient when the ice and snow lie insistently upon the earth and the roads become impassable. For this reason, every city of the north must needs acknowledge an elector, whose duty it is to exercise the tzarina's authority during the long winter months exactly as she would exercise it: as sternly, as fairly and as precisely. All of these electors have been warrior knights who have proved themselves in the ranks of the Winged Lancers, but those who are most valued are cousins of the tzarina who share the same illustrious descent and have ridden into battle by her side.

At the time when the events of this story took place, the walled town of Volkolamsk in the far north-east, which is closer to Praag than to its capital, was fortunate enough to have as its elector a younger cousin of Tzarina Katarin, whose name was Danila. Danila was said by her courtiers to be even more beautiful than the tzarina, but all courtiers are flatterers and she was not reckless enough to believe it, or to care overmuch whether it might be true or not. In her own lands her beauty was unparalleled in spite of a strange star-shaped scar beneath her left eye – the legacy of a glancing blow from a missile hurled by a goblin wolf rider.

Danila had earned that scar while riding out with a company of archers, which had fallen into an ambush set by their deadly enemies. Five good men had been killed in the ensuing skirmish, but the goblins had left nine of their own dead when they were routed, and three of those had been counted to Danila's credit. She was a heroine already, but until that day it had always been the lancers who thought of her as their own; afterwards, the archers hailed her as the Queen of the Bow, and boasted that they loved her more than their ancestors had ever loved an elector before. It was an easy boast to make, with which none need feel uncomfortable. The affection was reciprocated, and although it would have been direly undiplomatic for a woman in her position to take all her lovers from the ranks of the archers to the utter neglect of the lancers, Danila nevertheless indulged in as much careful favouritism as propriety allowed.

Rumour had it that of all the lovers she took, the only one who contrived to melt more than a single drop of the metal-hard ice in her heart was an archer named Ivan

Skavinsky – and it would not have been in the least surprising had it been true, because he was an unusually handsome boy. His captain and his sergeant thought him an indifferent archer, but that only meant that they were a little less disappointed when the attention he was obliged to pay the princess began to steal more and more time from his other duties.

Ivan Skavinsky was a study in contrasts. Although his skin was so extraordinarily pale that the line of every blue vein could be readily traced upon it, his silky hair was as black and glossy as a raven's wing. The irises of his eyes were as black as his pupils, so his eyes always seemed to be uncommonly frank and loving.

As a sorceress educated in the remnants of the ancient traditions of the Khan Queens, Danila knew well enough how to read faces. She knew that a man's pupils always increase in size when he catches sight of someone he loves, and always narrow a little when he tells a lie, so she knew that Ivan Skavinsky's eyes were naturally deceptive, bound by their unusual colouring to display love even when he felt none, and to protect his lies from easy detection, but she trusted them anyway. She was, after all, the Elector of Volkolamsk, the cousin of the tzarina, the Idol of the Archers and the possessor of a star-shaped scar that might even have made her more beautiful than she had been before. How could a boy like Ivan Skavinsky possibly look at her except with love, and how would he ever dare to lie to her?

How indeed?

For a while, of course, Ivan's eyes were entirely honest. When the elector first took him to her bed he was delirious with passion as well as self-congratulation. His excitement knew no bounds, and his desire for her was equally uncompromising. Perhaps that was part of the problem; had he loved more calmly he might have loved more wisely, and had he loved less extravagantly he might not have reduced his stores so quickly. As a Kislevite he should have been a past master of the art of hoarding, with the knowledge built into his bones that even the balmy summer must give way to ice-clad winter, but he was not. He had always been

favoured, even before Danila first set eyes on him, and had never learned hunger the hard way.



WHILE SUMMER lasted, Ivan was untroubled; and because Ivan was untroubled, so was Danila. They rode out together with the archers. They shot hares, wild boar, wolves and the occasional goblin, and they came home together, always in triumph, always rich-laden with delight. But summer in Kislev does not last long. The ice drew in as it always did, snowdrifts lay upon the roads, and the people of Volkolamsk withdrew behind their gates in search of artificial warmth. The archers retreated to the narrow-windowed towers and the crenellated walls, ever-ready to defend the people against whatever might come howling out of the forests and the hills to raid the city's storehouses. Danila the Elector retired with her young lover to her apartments, determined that no winter chill would trouble the heat of their mutual affection.

For a little while, all was well, and for a little while after, Danila had no inkling of the fact that it was well no longer – but eventually, the rumour was carried to her ears that Ivan Skavinsky had begun to pay more than due attention to one of her household servants, a girl of his own age named Natasha.

The rumour was first brought to Danila by a knight-captain of the lancers – as it had to be, for no one else would have dared to undertake such a mission – but she was not immediately inclined to believe him. For one thing, she knew full well that the lancers had become envious of the special relationship she had forged with the archers, whom they regarded as natural inferiors. For another, she could not believe that anyone who had an elector and descendant of the Khan Queens for a lover could possibly look twice at a mere servant. Like many a lady who had added a well-earned prowess to an inherited authority, Danila had never

had occasion to observe the perverse but undeniable fact that many men prefer looking down on their lovers to looking up to them, and have an instinctive inclination toward subservient partners.

Ivan Skavinsky was undoubtedly a fool, but he was not a fool of an uncommon kind.

At first, Danila did not charge her lover with any betrayal. She was content to look into his ebony eyes as they lay together and ask him whether he loved her truly – and when he said 'yes', while meeting her gaze directly, she believed him. But she began to watch him nevertheless, and she set others to keep watch on the serving-girl.

Within a week, the rumours were confirmed twice over, from two independent sources.

The next time the elector challenged her lover, she took care to stand upright while she did so, and to compel him to stand upright too.

'Will you swear that you love me?' she asked him.

'Yes,' he said, unflinchingly – for he had grown well used to the power which his eyes had to compel belief, and was never afraid to tell a barefaced lie.

'Will you swear that you have never laid a hand on my servant, Natasha, or looked at her lustfully?'

'I will swear it gladly,' he said, boldly, 'and will swear, moreover, that I never shall.'

'Will you pledge your eyes as a warrant of your honesty?' Danila then demanded – and for the first time, Ivan hesitated.

Perhaps he only hesitated because he had seen the elector hesitate, and realised that there was a cost to her in demanding such a pledge – but perhaps not. In either case, he might have given up the game at that point and counted himself wise to do so. He knew full well, though, that he was already out of his depth, and he was afraid that failing to make the pledge would cost him his eyes as surely as failing to keep it.

'I will swear it gladly,' he said.

He could not have meant the final word, but he must have meant to keep his word. No matter what kind of a fool he was he

knew now what danger he was in, and no man in Kislev could have doubted for an instant that the elector would claim her forfeit if he gave her cause.

Perhaps Danila should have settled for that, and sent Natasha away to some other household, with instructions that she should be kept incommunicado for at least a year – but her pride would not let her do it. To dispose of the instrument of temptation would be tantamount to an admission of potential defeat. It was bad enough to be forced to the suspicion that she could only keep the loyalty of her lover by issuing dire threats; to be forced to the suspicion that even that might not be enough was far too much.

So Danila let Natasha remain in her house, and made no move against her at all – for it would hardly be fitting for a warrior and a queen's deputy to acknowledge the competition of a skivvy. It must have been the case, however, that others took it upon themselves to warn the girl – and it must have been the case, too, that the girl took notice, for she was exceedingly careful to keep out of Ivan's way, and to offer no further encouragement to his touch.



I VAN UNDOUBTEDLY tried to put the girl out of his mind and concentrate his attention on its necessary object. He was able to tell himself, truthfully, that it was for Natasha's sake as much as his, and that she must know it. But there is a paradox in the matter of human thought, which is that the harder one tries to put something out of one's mind, the more insistently it sometimes clings. That which a mind strives with all its might to avoid may easily turn into a tortuous obsession. Thus it was with Ivan Skavinsky and his fancy for Natasha.

It might have been easier for him to do the sensible thing had there been a greater similarity between the two objects of his desire, but they could hardly have been more different. The difference in their stations was almost the least of it. Danila

was olive-skinned and blonde-haired, while Natasha was as pale-skinned as Ivan and almost as dark-haired. Danila was muscular, as hard as she was supple, while Natasha was soft and utterly yielding. Danila's eyes were golden brown, and Natasha's bright blue. And where Danila had that wondrous, sprawling starburst scar, Natasha had a tiny, perfectly rounded black mole. They were too nearly opposites, far too easily contrasted; it was hardly possible to think of one without recalling the complementary phantom that was the other.

And Natasha loved Ivan. Of that he could have no doubt, for the meaning was clear in the way her blue eyes widened – almost turning to black – every time she looked at him.



NO ONE EVER came forward, after Ivan Skavinsky had given his pledge, to say that he had bedded Natasha, or that he had kissed her, or even that he had touched her with his fingertips; the two had more than enough self-control between them to contrive that much. But she could not help looking at him, not realising how much she gave away every time she did so, and he could not help looking at her. He could not tear his eyes away – and that, in the end, was what betrayed him.

No one else could have whispered in the elector's ear that her lover was looking at another woman and expect such a feeble accusation to be fatal – but no one needed to carry that particular news, because Danila was on watch herself, and her eyes were uncommonly keen. She saw the way that Ivan's eyes wandered and strayed, and she concentrated even harder.

Danila became expert, in the end, in detecting that extremely delicate line which marked the limit of Ivan Skavinsky's pupil and its boundary with the black iris. By assiduous study, Danila learned to read her lover's eyes as even his mother had never been able to do – and when the third occasion came on which

she asked for reassurance of his loyalty, she was fully equipped to measure his response.

'Do you love me truly?' she demanded, hopefully.

'Yes I do,' he said, falsely.

'Am I the only one that you love?' she asked, grimly.

'Yes you are,' he answered, falsely.

'Have you ever betrayed me,' she whispered, 'with the touch of your hand or the desire of your eyes?'

'No, I have not,' he stated, falsely.

She knew, of course, that she was asking too much. She knew that the boy had only a little more control over the claims of attention that were made on his eyes than he had over the intangible dilation of his pupils. But she was a descendant of the Khan Queens, Elector of Volkolamsk and the deputy of Katarin the Ice Queen. She had her pride, and she had her responsibilities; her soul was the soul of Kislev, armoured by ice not only against the ravages of Chaos, but also the distress of compassion.

Danila summoned a physician, and had him cut out Ivan Skavinsky's eyes with scalpels, so that they could not betray her any longer, whether by reflex or design. By the same token, of course, they could not betray him any longer – not even to his most intimate lover, who was heir to the vestiges of the arcane wisdom of the Khan Queens – but that seemed perfectly in keeping with the innate sense of justice that all true Kislevites have.

'Fetch me the cleverest artificer in the city,' Danila said to the knight-captain of the Winged Lancers – and when the artificer was brought to her, she commanded him to make a pair of false eyes out of polished ebony. When these were delivered, two days later, she had them fitted to her lover's skull, where they stood out even more widely, frankly and honestly than the ones he had had before.

'Will you swear that you will never lie to me again,' she said.

'Yes,' he said, his voice as soft and silky as his hair. 'I will so swear – but I shall not do so gladly.'

She took the final remark, a little grudgingly, as a testament to his determination to speak truthfully from now on, even though his eyes could no longer betray him.

'Will you swear that your love will henceforth be loyal to me, and to me only?'

'I cannot,' he told her, his honesty as unnatural as his eyes. 'For I can no longer remember your face without remembering another, as inseparable from it as a shadow from a man in the full sun of summer, and I can no longer love you without that love being shadowed, even though I must live in darkness until the day I die.'

That answer startled the elector as much as it distressed her. She noticed that his arms were drawn slightly backwards, as if to expose his breast more openly to the thrust of a dagger or an arrow shot from a bow.

'That I am bound to forbid,' she told him. 'Fortunately, I have art to draw upon as well as the power of destruction, for I am party to the last secrets of the ancient Ice Magic.'

Having said that, she retreated to her innermost chamber, to prepare for the casting of a spell. It was the kind of spell that can only be worked in the very heart of the northern winter, when the noonday sun is so very low upon the horizon that it resembles a baleful peeping eye, and its red rays race along the surface of the fallen snow like floods of bloodstained tears.

The demand which Danila made upon the resources of the ancient Ice Magic was this: that Ivan Skavinsky's false eyes would no longer be absolutely blind, but would be capable of sighting one object, and one alone. That one object was, of course, her own face. Nor would she have to be in his line of sight, or even present in the same place, for this sight to be granted to him; it would be ever-present, occupying his every waking moment and his every dream; and, above all else, it must not be shadowed in any way at all – it must reign supreme, denying any opposite or complement.

Perhaps it was a paradoxical demand, incapable of fulfilment as a matter of logic. But what is magic, if not command over the impossible? And what is logic in a world of magic but one more monster to be casually slain?

The Khan Queens were long gone, and the knowledge handed down to their remote descendants had been deeply corrupted by error and forgetfulness, but the Ice Magic had not lost all its power.

The spell worked.

When the solstice was past, Ivan Skavinsky could see again, but all he could see was Danila, Elector of Volkolamsk and cousin of the Ice Queen. She was imperiously present to his every waking moment, and the dominatrix of his every dream. He could not escape her.

But he could not love her either.

Was it forgetfulness or pride that caused the queen to leave that out of the spell she wrought? It hardly matters; love compelled by magic is puppet-love, and quite worthless. In order to have any love worthy of the name, Danila had no alternative but to hope that Ivan could and would continue to love her, in spite of her obligation to take action in the matter of his straying eyes.

He told her the truth when she asked, but she decided to give him time to overcome his bitterness: time to recover his sense of balance and his true self; time to adjust to the ever presence of her image and the inescapability of her passion.

It might have worked. Perhaps it should have worked. The distraught youth should have been delighted, once he had recovered his mental equilibrium, to discover that his royal paramour still loved him, even though he was blind. He should have learned to accept it as a kindness when she told him that his new eyes were even more beautiful than those he had lost.

But that was not what happened. Natasha was still in service in the elector's household. Although she no longer had an image that was capable of reproduction in Ivan's blind eyes, she still had a voice and he still had his ears. Although she was never unwise enough to touch him, he learned to recognise her presence well enough, and could not help turning towards her whenever she was nearby.

The hearing of blind men often grows keener and far more discriminating. The fact that Danila's image was perpetually set before Ivan's false eyes made no difference to this process, for it gave him

no guidance as to his actual circumstances, and he had to learn to ignore it in order to find his way around.

It so happened that Natasha's voice was as different from Danila's as any Kislevite voice could be. Whereas Danila's voice was as hard and certain as metallic ice, Natasha's was soft and perennially tremulous. Whereas Danila's voice was demanding, even when she was at her most generous, Natasha's was always supplicating, even when she was giving instructions. The music of Danila's voice was as full and robust as a company of horns and drums, while the music of Natasha's was all plaintive strings and liquid woodwinds. Not only was there no mistaking them, but it seemed that nature had intended them to be two halves of a whole, each one indescribable without negative reference to the other.

This, Ivan thought, was a passion that could be kept secret – but there never was an ice-bound citadel where a secret of any sort could easily be kept, and Volkolamsk was no exception. Ivan's eyes were blank, but the expressions of his face still gave betrayed him. The difference that came over him when Natasha was near could not be hidden from inquisitive eyes, and soon became the subject of audible rumour.

Ivan might have wept when he became certain that the rumours had reached the ears of the elector, had not the wellspring of his tears dried up when he lost his fleshy eyes. When Danila charged him with his faithlessness he readily admitted it.

'And what will you do now, kin of the Ice Queen?' he demanded. 'When my eyes were tempted, you had them cut out. Will you summon your physician again, to plunge hot needles into my inner ears, tearing the membranes that respond to sound? Will you retreat to your crucible and cast another spell, so that I shall hear nothing for all eternity, even in my dreams, but your voice? And what shall your voice whisper, Beloved of the Archers? Will you tell me over and over again how much you love me? And will you set about breaking my fingers next, and roasting the tips in a fire, lest they should ever linger upon a soft fur, or a

silken sleeve, or even a cold blade that was not yours?'

'You will never again hear me say that I love you,' she said, truthfully, 'for I am cured of that fever now.'

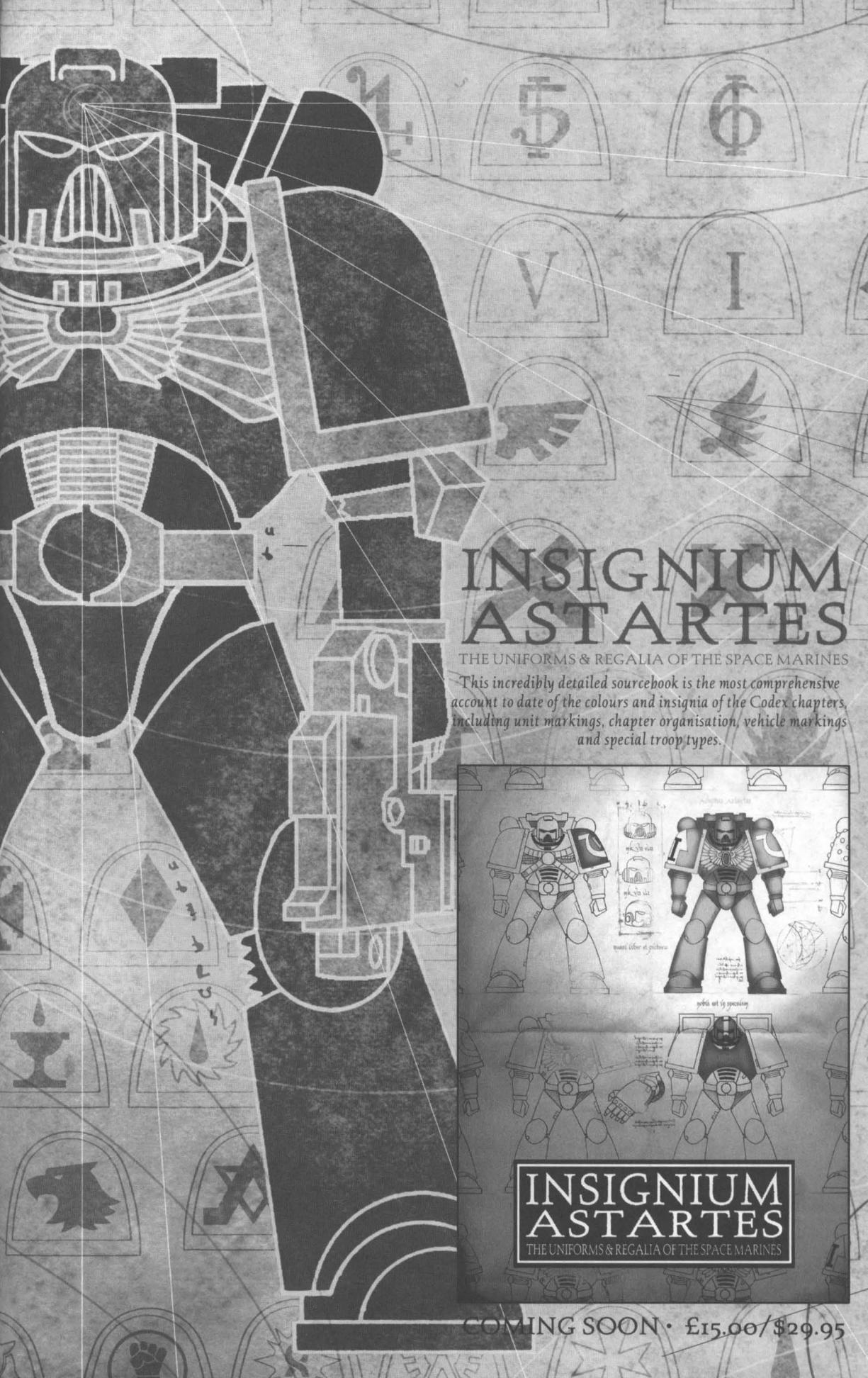
The Elector of Volkolamsk commissioned her torturers to break Ivan Skavinsky's fingers anyway, one by one, and to tear away his fingernails in order that his distress might be increased until they grew again. But she left his ears untouched, so that he might hear the whispers which circulated even in the cold dungeons to which he was confined.



FOR SEVERAL years thereafter, while winter laid siege to the town of Volkolamsk, Danila's aides followed the orders she had given them, to send garrulous informants to converse at length within earshot of Ivan's cell, in order that he might continue to have news of everything that transpired within her household, and the barracks where the archers slept, and of all the lovers she had, and all those who subsequently enjoyed the affections of Natasha.

Whether he sat on the stone floor of his cell, or lay upon the straw of his bed, the image of Danila remained forever present to Ivan's sight, and it did not take him long to regret very bitterly indeed that he no longer loved her. He tried with all his might to console himself by conjuring the sound of Natasha's voice, but he could not do it. In time, even the memory of that voice faded into silence, perhaps because he had not been blind long enough to perfect the art of auditory recollection, and perhaps because he had insufficient ice armouring his heart to prevent the leakage of its vital nourishment.

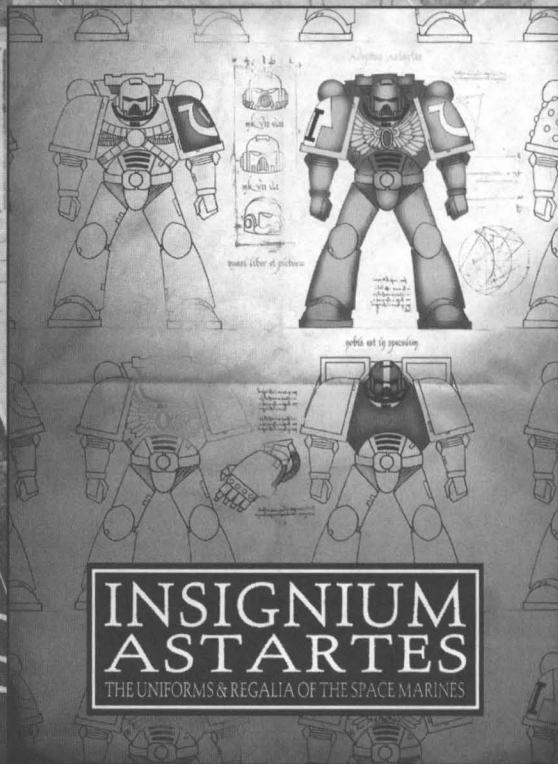
Danila forgot about him soon enough, as was only right and necessary. Justice had been done, after the fashion of a country where all debts must be calculated with scrupulous precision, and collected with calm determination. *



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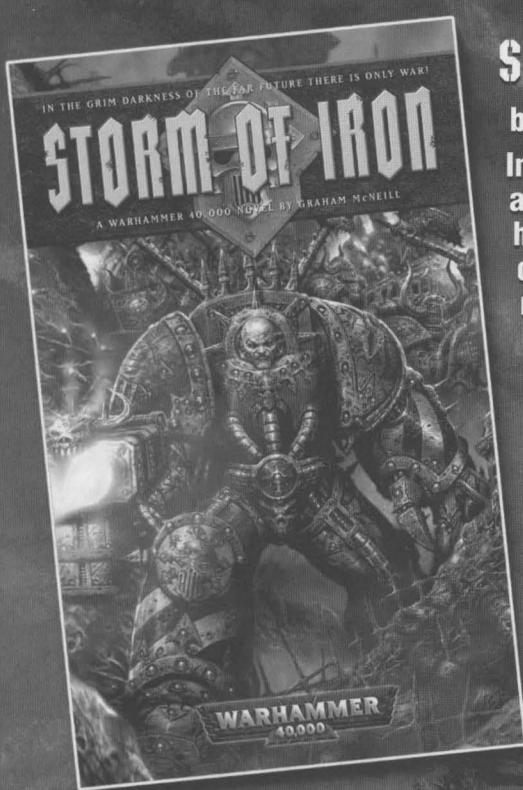
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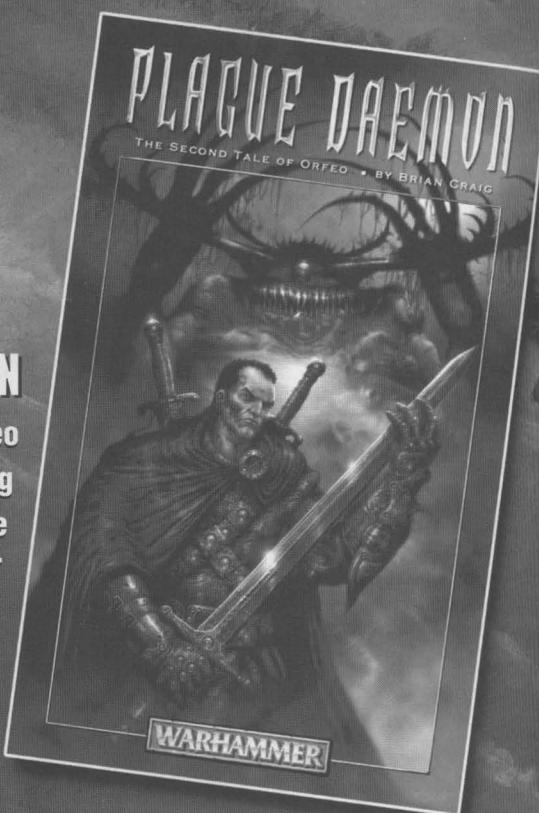


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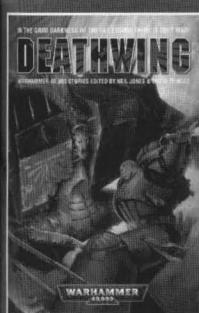
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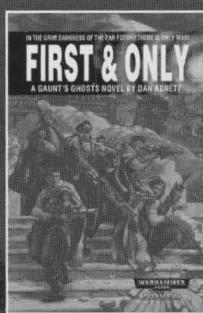
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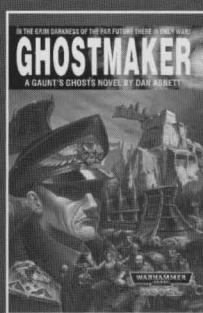
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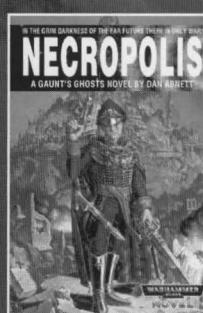
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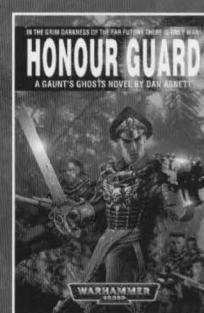
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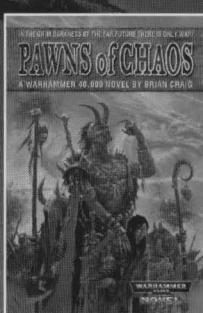
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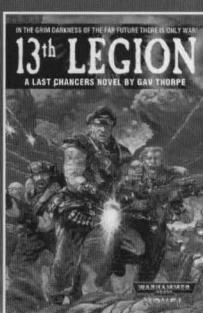
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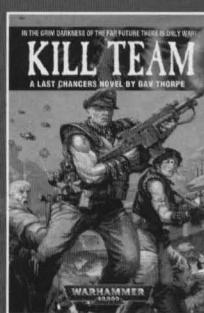
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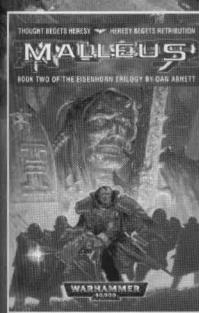
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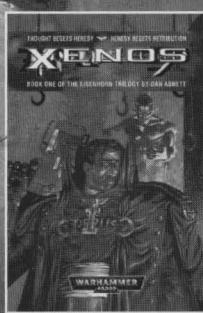
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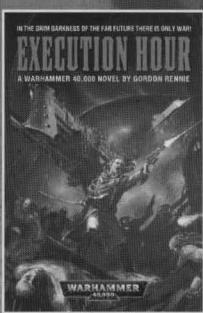
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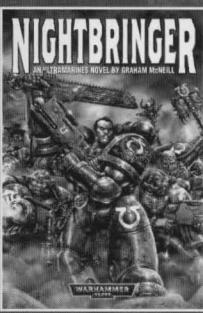
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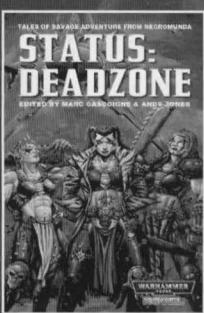
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Lightning split the darkness overhead and the rain was torrential. The storm and the bizarre activity around Bakunin's booth had sent the commonfolk fleeing from the meadow. The trailer was still vibrating and shaking, and oily brown smoke was gushing from the hole in the side wall I'd cut to break my way out. Inside, lights crackled and flashed and the phantom screaming continued. The warpaint was berserk.

• **HEAD HUNTING** by **Robin D. Laws**

Franziskus dropped the dagger; he dove to the ground to recover it. Angelika let go of the cage, but the creature seized her jacket and yanked on it, sending her head pitching into the metal bars. She got her elbow between her face and the cage, cushioning the blow. With jagged fingernails, the undead beast raked at her arm. He tore open the fabric of her jacket. He seized it; she struggled free.

• **DEFF SKWADRON** by **Gordon Rennie & Paul Jeacock**

KATCH DA SQUIGEON

'Flamin' Mork, boss. Them gitz from Kannibal Skwadron 'ave beat us to it!'

• **LIBERATION DAY** by **Matthew Farrer & Edward Rusk**

The force of the orks' brains beat at his eardrums like surf in a storm, and Challis almost didn't hear the muffled explosion at the far end of the chamber as their bombs went off. Then smoke began to roil from several places along the walls and suddenly the air was filled with screams as the chained orks began to convulse and catch fire. Green smoke spurted from mouths, arcs of power crackled between ears, eyes lit up like emerald searchlights.

• **A MATTER OF EVIDENCE** by **Brian Craig**

'I cannot,' he told her, his honesty as unnatural as his eyes. 'For I can no longer remember your face without remembering another, as inseparable from it as a shadow from a man in the full sun of summer, and I can no longer love you without that love being shadowed, even though I must live in darkness until the day I die.'

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